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44 Western

MAGAZINE

JAN.



3

**QUICK-TRIGGER
NOVELETTES!**

**THE TOWN THEY
COULDN'T TAME!**

by **M. HOWARD LANE**

**PIPE LINE
TO HELL**

by **LEE E. WELLS**

**THE CRIPPLE-K
KILLER**

by **THOMAS
THOMPSON**





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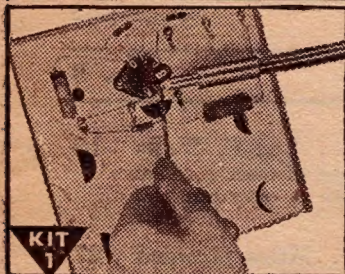
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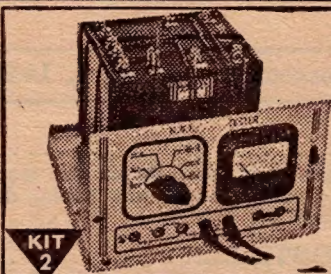
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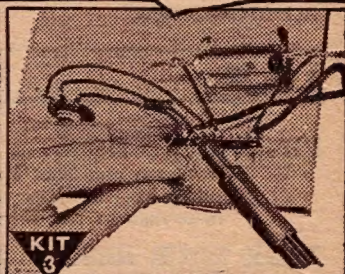
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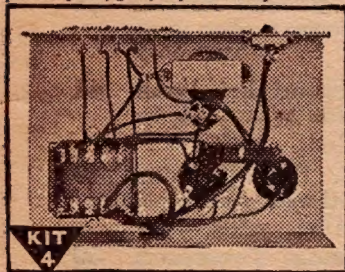
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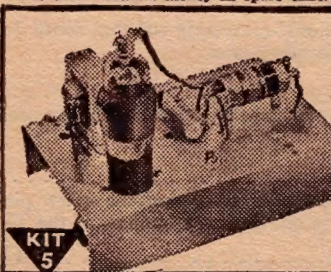
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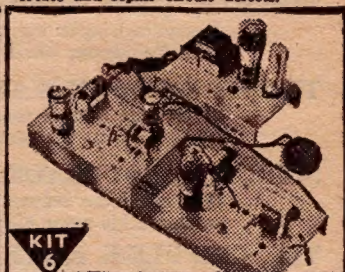
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Vol. 13

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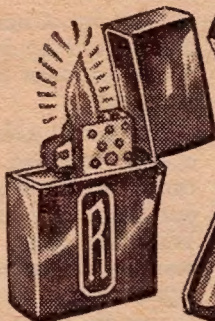
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★ .44 TALK ★

“W HAT’S all the ruckus about?” asked the Old Timer, pushing open our editorial doors marked “No Admittance”. “You havin’ a shootin’ match in here, son?” Then he flung himself on the floor as another fusilade of b.b. bullets passed over his head. “What’s the tarnation idea?” he mumbled, face down in the broadloom carpet.

“Ping! Ping!” a shower of tiny slugs buried themselves in the opposite wall where two portraits of Hirohito and Peron, ringed with bullseyes, were inviting trouble.

“Hello, Old Timer. Think my nephew will like this gun?” we asked, violating all rules by peering down the barrel. “It’s for his birthday. Great kid.”

“Wal, his uncle is getting a lot of fun out of it,” puffed the Old Timer as he rose painfully to his feet. “Jeepers! Sure thought the Bar X had me that time!”

“What gang was that?” we asked idly, digging the bullets out of the wall with the Old Timer’s bowie knife.

“It was way back in ’86 . . .” he began, settling himself for the afternoon.

“Sorry, Old Timer, haven’t any time now. I’ve fooled around with this fool gun so long I’m way behind,” we said.

“No, it was in ’85 . . . or mebbe ’84 . . .” he continued calmly.

“Later, later,” we pleaded. “Have to get through in time to take the kid hunting with me this weekend.”

“Hunting!” said the Old Timer in such a pleased tone that we realized we had said exactly the wrong thing. “Mountain lions are real game. Back in the days when I was a Ranger. . .”

“A Ranger?” we asked suspiciously. “You mean you worked for the government?”

“Yessir, well over on the side o’ law an’ order I was at the time,” he chuckled. “Leastways, for awhile. In the winter when ridin’ jobs wuz scarce a good shot could make a deal o’ money in wolf pelts and an occasional catamount was pure gravy.

“I ever tell you about the wolf big as a cowpony I killed on top of Flat Face Butte in the winter of ’83?”

“No, you never did,” we said cautiously.

“Wal, there I was. Me and the wolf. I was unarmed and both of us was mighty

mad. Yessir. The wolf kept circling around me, getting closer an’ closer. And I kept circling the wolf, just to keep him guessing. Suddenly, he sprang at me! A hundred fifty pounds o’ full-grown he-wolf. An’ he looked like he was all green eyes and slaverin’ fangs.” Old Timer paused to light his pipe, then looked up at us.

We were still suspicious, but our curiosity was getting the better of us.

“Only one thing to do—an’ I did it. I shoved my hand as fur down his throat as I could reach, an’ there he stayed, about four inches from my face, a-snappin’ an’ a snarlin’.

“Then I took a good hold, braced my feet an’ turned thet critter inside out like a sleeve!”

“Get out of here!” we roared, propelling him toward the door. “You old coot, you’re either drunk or the biggest liar since Paul Bunyan!”

But we chuckled as the irrepressible old codger tramped out of the office. We turned to the huge pile of manuscripts on our desk. We had a load of work to do. With this issue, *.44 Western* becomes a monthly magazine, publishing twelve times a year instead of the six we have scheduled during the years of the war.

This is *.44 Western*’s answer to a newsstand sell-out and a rising demand for Western fact and fiction from magazine readers. Sticking to our standards of fast moving and well-written stories by writers who know the West, *.44 Western* will bring you just twice as much entertainment in the future—and of course a bit of fantasy from our good friend the Old Timer. Guess we’ll use his last tale at Friday night’s beer party. Let’s see how did it go now. “. . . Wal, there I was with no gun and a big wolf getting closer and closer. . . .”

—THE EDITOR

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Pistol Packin' Lawyer

By J. Carroll

Temple Houston, Oklahoma's ace lawyer, figured a smoking sixgun was the most convincing courtroom argument.

TEXAS had Sam Houston, but Oklahoma, during her wild and woolly territorial days, claimed his son, Temple Houston. Like his illustrious, hard-fighting father, Temple was a frontiersman of great ability both in the wilderness and in the courtroom.

He could use either pistol or rifle so expertly that few men in the Territory were capable of matching his marksmanship. And in the frontier courtrooms he had no peer—the people always clambered to have copies of his addresses to the juries.

But Temple Houston had an eccentric streak running through him that made him do things in a unique manner. Contrary to the contemporary, local fashion, he let his rich black hair grow long, so that it flowed abundantly to his shoulders. At one time he wore into the courtroom a rattlesnake skin necktie because it would worry the judge, who was deathly afraid of snakes.

Although quiet and reserved, this colorful frontiersman was stubborn. Once he had made up his mind, nothing could change it. He fought desperately for his principles, frequently going to such extremes that people sometimes questioned his sanity.

There came a day when Temple Houston was called upon to defend a local merchant who had killed a cowpuncher. The merchant had little knowledge of gun-fighting and because a cowboy, a known gunslinger with a lightning draw, had threatened his life, the shopkeeper had shot first, fear compelling him to act. The frontier lawyer firmly believed the merchant innocent of first degree murder and brought out, at the trial, the difference in the ability of the cowboy and the defendant.

The prosecution, however, tore down Houston's argument; and when it came time to make the final address to the jury, Temple knew that he would have to take drastic action to convince the judge and jury of his point.

"Gentlemen," he said to the jury, pacing slowly and deliberately back and forth before the box, "you all know the reputation this cowman had when it came to gun-fighting. And you all know that the de-

fendant seldom used a gun, and what's more, he never before entered into a gun-fight. There are gunmen in Oklahoma who can give a man a six-shooter and before that man can fire it, the gunmen would have drawn their guns and fired the chambers empty. Like this . . . !"

As he uttered the last words, he whirled and drew a sixgun, emptying it pointblank in the direction of the jurymen! Lightning could not have been faster. The astonished citizens scampered, ducked and leaped out of windows and doors, upsetting everything in their way. They thought that Houston had finally lost his mind.

The lawyer, however, did not stop there. With the last flash from his six-shooter, he spun on his heels, drawing his remaining weapon and firing it at the judge, who lost no time in following the jurymen.

The court rebuked Houston severely. He merely smiled, saying, "They were only blank shells, judge. I was only trying to show you men that my client, who is not experienced with guns, had no chance against the cowman."

The angry jurymen found the defendant guilty, but Houston won a new trial for his client because the jury had separated during the course of the trial. . . .

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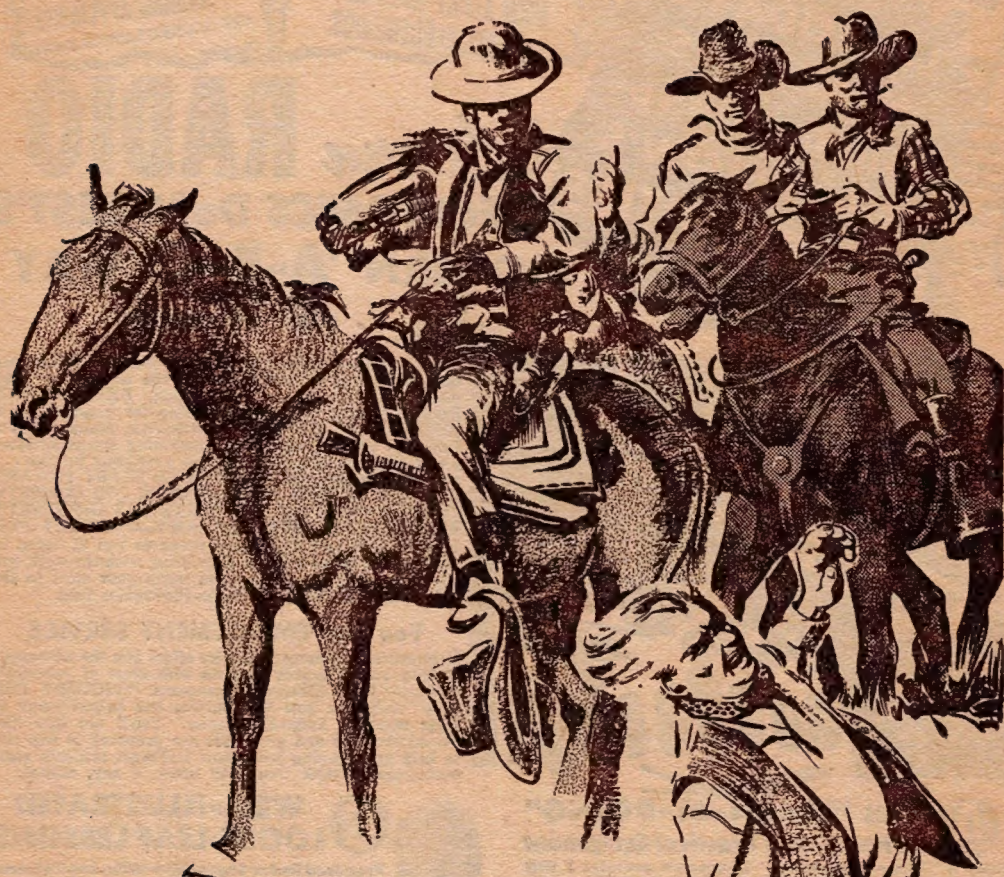
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Pipeline to Hell



CHAPTER ONE

The Devil's Uncle

DESPITE the sweat that rolled in rivulets off his lean, tanned face, Bent Morgan could still whistle. From the cheerful sound of it, the tall, lean cowboy seemed to be a man without a worry in the world. Actually he had less than five dollars in his blue Levi pockets, and he had no idea when he would dab a loop on his next job. However, riding chuckline was no new thing to Bent Morgan. It seemed that most of his twenty-odd years had been spent wandering from one spread to another, never staying very long.

A temper to match his flaming red hair had often sent him on his travels. But there was a breezy restlessness to him, an itch in his heel, a certain inquisitive light in his clear blue eyes that sent him on over the next hill to see what might lie beyond. This time he had wandered south and east into Texas. Just yesterday he had seen his first herd of oil der-

A Stirring Novelette of the Untamed Frontier

By Lee E. Wells

A rambling tumbleweeder, Bent Morgan could dab a loop and spin a gun with the best of them. . . . But riding herd on treacherous miles of oil-filled pipeline was something else again—especially when a band of gun-slamming renegades had called the turn with flaming torches and short-fused dynamite!



The gunslicks looked on as their boss struck the wounded stranger.

ricks. This was all quite different from the mesa country of New Mexico.

Not far ahead, the yellow dirt road twisted around the end of a low hogback. The sun beat down mercilessly and the wide brim of the dusty hat threw a dark shadow across the flat angles of Bent's face. He stopped whistling long enough to wipe the sweat off his face.

His head jerked up when he heard the shot. He listened, eyes keening into the sun toward the hogback. The shot had come from beyond it, but it was not repeated.

His blunted spurs lightly touched the bay, and the animal broke into a mile-eating trot. Bent loosened the Colt in the scratched holster, just in case. The bend around the hogback loomed closer.

Bent checked the horse and slowly rounded the turn. He saw instantly the source of the shot and pulled the bay to a quick standstill. Nearby, a group of horsemen surrounded a wagon that carried a load of large pipe. One man clutched his shoulder and blood stained his fingers. His stubbled face reflected both hate and pain, the thin lips snarled, "Let me salivate him, Faro. Let me back-shoot the mangy son!"

Bent's sharp eyes cut to the wagon. A tall, powerful man stood over a figure sprawled in the dust. He turned and grinned up at the wounded renegade, shaking his head.

"Killing's too good for a sidewinder that'd throw five hundred teamsters out of a job. Ken says we're to teach this jasper a lesson. Break him up a little, maybe, but Ken wants him to live."

He bent down and jerked the fallen man to his feet. Bent's eyes narrowed. The lighter man staggered a little, his eyes still dull, brain fogged. The man called Faro chuckled deep in his barrel chest. He deliberately drew back his hand and knocked the other man sprawling. Bent stiffened and his hand dropped down to his Colt. He checked himself. This wasn't his augerment—yet.

Faro pounced on his victim again. Once more he dragged the man to his feet. Ed Lennox," Faro said, his swarthy face close, "you got yourself a lesson coming. Pipelines ain't wanted in Kaster. We done told you nice-like but you won't listen. Now you'll sure get the idea the hard way."

The bruised lips twisted in a defiant grin. "You're wasting your time, Ford. As long as I'm alive I'm not convinced!"

"Maybe," Faro chuckled again. He threw swift orders over his shoulders. "Place the dynamite, Ringo. Your blasted pipe is going sky-high, Lennox, and I ought to send you with it."

A MAN swung out of leather and rum-maged in his saddlebags. Bent watched and frowned deeply. There were ten of the hard-jawed gunhawks, counting the man named Faro Ford. All of them had the in-

delible mark of the professional gun slinger, hard eyes, cruel mouths. Still, Bent tried to warn himself, it wasn't his argument and he didn't owe the gent named Lennox a plugged peso.

Ringo withdrew a small bundle of sticks and pulled a fuse from his pockets. Lennox stared, dismay showing on his battered face. He suddenly wrenched free of Ford's grip and plunged toward Ringo. Ford tripped Lennox and then calmly kicked him in the side.

Bent's hand went down to his holster of its own volition, it seemed. Anger swept through him so that he saw the hulking shouldered Ford through a haze of red. The heavy Colt settled into his calloused palm and the black muzzle lined on Ford's broad stomach.

"Just hold open the pot a minute," he snapped. "You can deal me in, and I got six lead chips."

The men whirled around, hands dropping for their guns. They froze when they saw the Colt, hammer-dogged back, topped by a pair of ice-cold blue eyes. Ford slowly straightened and Bent saw the angry jump of a muscle in the coarse-skinned cheek.

"You're off your range, complete," Ford said evenly. "Get to riding before you're blasted from your saddle."

Bent's gun muzzle moved just enough that Ford's muddy brown eyes swung to it. Bent grinned, though it didn't reach to his eyes.

"Kinda hard to do right now as I see it, hombre. They'll sure plant you in Boothill right beside me. You, Ringo, drop that dynamite. I might hit it when the shooting starts!"

Ringo jerked as if he had been slapped. He glanced nervously at Ford and then slowly bent at the knees, placing the dynamite in the dust of the road. Lennox moaned and tried to pull himself up. He fell flat on his face in the dust.

One of the gunhawks suddenly jerked his Colt from leather. Bent's six flicked to one side, belched smoke and flame. It centered again on Faro's broad chest before the man's hand had moved more than half way to his holster. The rest remained silent while the cursing renegade nursed his smashed fingers. Bent smiled slightly.

"You knocked him down," he said evenly to Ford. "Now pick him up and set him

on the wagon. Now do that nice easy-like!"

"You won't live ten minutes in Kaster," Ford said through set teeth. "I'm working for Ken Devlin!"

"Never heard of the hombre," Bent answered. His blue eyes flashed. "I told you to help the man up on the wagon! Do you need persuading?"

Ford took a deep breath. His face was broad. The bulbous nose, low, thick brows and squinted eyes made it seem as though his features had been formed of flabby dough and all squeezed together. But Bent didn't miss the hard, cruel jaw buried under the fat of the full cheeks.

Ford glanced around at his men, muddy eyes flashing as though he dared them even to think. He bent down and helped Lennox to his feet. Under the steady threat of Bent's gun, Ford shoved and pushed Lennox up onto the seat of the wagon. He turned, face red and flushed.

"Now you gents, one at a time," Bent ordered. "lift them guns and pitch 'em in the wagon. Ford, you can start the proceedings."

Ford started to say something but changed his mind. He carefully lifted his Colts and tossed them into the wagon. They hit the pipe with a clang and then rattled all the way down to the bed. Under Bent's sharp eyes, the rest followed suit.

"Now git yonderly," Bent ordered, "and git pronto."

"You and me is due to meet again," Ford spat.

"Sure," Bent nodded, "but right now I'm plumb tired of looking at that ugly face. Now git going."

Ford swung his heavy bulk into saddle. He spoke a brief, angry word to his men and they moved off down the road. At last they disappeared and Bent stepped down from the saddle. Lennox sat groggily on the wagon seat, hardly realizing where he was. Bent climbed up beside him.

He found a big canteen under the seat and forced Lennox to drink. Then Bent, using his neckerchief, wiped the blood and grime off the man's face. Lennox stirred and the last of the fog left his brain. He took the cloth and finished the job, wincing now and then as he touched a sore spot. Bent patiently watched him.

Lennox might have been a good looking gent if he wasn't so bruised. One eye al-

ready had puffed and would be completely closed before an hour had passed. But the other was clear and hazel set under straight black brows. Dark brown hair waved back from a high tanned forehead. The nose was slightly hooked, high-ridged, the mouth full and friendly, if Bent discounted the cut and bruised lips. Lennox wore a dark shirt and blue Levis, fine tooled boots. There was no sign of Colt or rifle in the wagon.

"Them jaspers changed you around considerable," Bent said judiciously and Lennox smiled despite the battered lips. Then he sobered.

"Thanks for taking a hand, cowboy. I sure appreciate it. But you'd better ride as far from Kaster as you can."

"Why?" Bent asked. "I ain't even seen the place yet."

"You don't want to now," Lennox shook his head. "Faro Ford will be aching to kill you and Ken Devlin won't let anyone push his men around, least of all Ford. I'll manage to take care of myself now, and thanks to you. But take the out-trail and take it fast."

"Everybody tries to scare me," Bent complained. "That's the second time I've heard the name Ken Devlin. What is he? ... The devil's uncle?"

"I've thought it sometimes," Lennox said with a faint smile. He had stopped the blood running from the corner of his lips. "Right now, Mister, you're sitting on a wagon load of trouble and gunsmoke. Take my advice and keep out of Boothill while you can."

CHAPTER TWO

Guns Speak Loudest

BENT stubbornly shook his head. He looked around at the pipe in the wagon bed and then up at Lennox, puzzled. He shoved his hat far back on his flaming red hair and rubbed his jaw with his thumb nail.

"Ain't often that a man gets the stuffings knocked out of him for just nothing at all, or because someone don't like the shape of his face. I reckon this load of iron has something to do with it."

"That's right," Lennox sighed. "It has everything to do with it. If Ken Devlin would leave me alone, I'd make Kaster

twice the field it is. I'm sure I could do it!"

Bent's brows rose in high arches. "Don't that depend on oil? No matter how much pipe you got, there has to be enough oil to fill it."

"That's right, when you're drilling. Kaster sits twelve miles from the nearest railroad. How does the oil get there?"

"Hauled by team, I reckon," Bent said.

"That's right, and the oil's not worth a penny to any one until it's shipped. The more shipped, the more money is made. The less it costs to haul it to the railroad, the more profit. That's where the pipe comes in. I could lay a line from Kaster to the railroad, pick up the oil from the wells by pump and shove it through these pipes."

"Twelve miles!" Bent exclaimed.

Lennox shrugged. "It's a new-fangled idea from the Pennsylvania fields. It's an idea that's going to grow. Someday pipe will carry oil from these Texas fields all the way to the Atlantic Ocean."

Bent shook his head. "I reckon I'll let you take the pot, Lennox. I know a heap more about branding cows than oil drilling, nohow. But where does this Ford jasper and them gunhawks come in the picture?"

"Ford works for Ken Devlin. Devlin, by crookedness, killing, and a few murders thrown in, has made himself head of the teamsters in Kaster. They don't like it, or like him. If Devlin didn't have the backing of his gunslammers, the freighters themselves would throw him out."

"I never heard of a mule-skinner that was afraid of much," Bent said. "This man Devlin must sure have a heap of power."

"Plenty of it," Lennox answered. "He's the top dog of Kaster—and you locked horns with his right hand man."

"From the sight of your face, you and me is in the same boat," Bent chuckled. He then sobered. "But get on with the jawing about Devlin."

"Once he had control of the teamsters," Lennox sighed, "Devlin decided to make himself a fortune. First off, his gunslammers keep any new freighter or teamster from coming into Kaster, unless he agrees to take Devlin's orders. So, everything coming in and out of the town, oil, merchandise, supplies, rigging, or equipment, pays a tax to Devlin."

Bent's eyes had narrowed as he stared

down the road in the direction Ford and the renegades had taken. Lennox sat with his shoulders slumped, long arms hanging loosely between his knees. His one good eye showed discouragement.

"DEVLIN wasn't satisfied," he continued at last, "with the money he made. He wanted more. He forced the hauling charges up. Some of the freighters, under Pop Sibley, tired to break Devlin's rule."

"I was wondering when I'd hear of a man with backbone," Bent said.

Lennox answered Bent's challenge. "Backbone alone isn't much good against a dozen or more killing sons. Ford took care of a few of the teamsters, at least we think he did. They were found murdered in Kaster's back alleys. No proof at all against Devlin and Ford, but old Pop found himself left all alone in the fight."

"Where does this pipe come in?" Bent jerked his thumb toward the tubes.

"I watched the very first pipeline work in Pennsylvania. I'm an engineer and I saw where some improvements could be made. I wanted an actual test and a chance to show oil men what this idea will mean to them in a few years. Kaster's the first big oil strike, and I come here."

"Someone backing you?"

"A man named Walt Mitchell, who owns a dozen wells. At first, like the rest, he wouldn't listen. Figured the whole idea was loco. But when Devlin raised the ante on the hauling charges, Mitchell got mad clear through. He told me to go ahead and build the line and get the oil flowing to the railroad."

"Now I can begin to read the brand," Bent nodded. "Your pipe line will cut out most of the hauling from Kaster. It means that Devlin won't have the dinero or swing the long loop he used to. No wonder Ford was figuring on dynamiting your load."

"There you have it," Lennox said. "Mitchell swears he'll spend every penny he's got to break Devlin. I think he will. I've got a chance to prove my idea is good—if Devlin and his gunhawks are whipped. But as I said, this is no business of yours."

"Maybe," Bent said thoughtfully and looked up quickly. "What do the jerk-line gents think of this idea? It sure will knock them out of work, and I'd figure they'd back

Devlin this time. He should be able to convince them that under his method they'd be allowed to continue to operate."

"Most of them realize that in the long run, the pipe line will mean more work. With it in operation, more wells can be opened and that means more supplies to be hauled. At first, though, they were against it until I had a long talk with Pop Sibley and some of the others."

"Then Devlin and his gunhawks is all you have to worry about?"

"All!" Lennox asked and then laughed without humor. "You saw what happened today. It's just a sample and I have no doubt that Devlin will try to kill me before it's over. You call sneaking sons, renegades and gun slammers *all*?"

Bent shrugged. "Reckon you can drive this load on to town?" he asked the badly battered man.

"Sure," Lennox looked sharply at him, but Bent only dropped lithely to the ground. He walked to his horse and swung into saddle, grinning up at Lennox.

"Well, what are we waiting for? You ain't doing no good just sitting there."

"Now look," Lennox swung around. His face was discolored by dark bruises and his lips were puffed. The one eye was no more than a dark slit in an aureole of angry green, red and blue. "Don't be a stubborn, locoed fool. You've already made yourself a bad enemy, Faro Ford. He'd as soon backshoot you as not, and there's plenty of chances for that in Kaster. Any of those gunhawks would take a potshot at you on sight, right now. Ken Devlin's not to be fooled with. Ride back the way you came while you're still able to sit a saddle."

Bent shook his head and his eyes glinted. He stabbed his finger up toward Lennox. "You fight fire with fire and guns with guns, hombre. What you need is someone who savvies a six."

"That's right, but—" Lennox halted abruptly and stared at Bent. "You?"

"I'm riding chuckline and ain't got a thing to lose. I don't like Faro Ford and I never run from no threats. This Ken Devlin is sure ready for a come-down and I plumb admire the fight you've given him so far. I'm placing my chips on you, Lennox."

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CHAPTER THREE

Job for a Drifter

KASTER was a section lifted bodily out of hell and completely surrounded by derricks. There was a veritable forest of the tall frames, stretching as far as eye could see over the low valley in which Kaster stood. As the wagon of pipes had topped the ridge overshadowing the field, Bent had taken one look at the sea of gaunt frames. His eyes had widened and he gulped but he showed no other sign of surprise or astonishment.

The moment the wagon had rolled down onto the valley floor, the heavy odor of oil was everywhere. A constant stream of wagons, loaded with heavy barrels of oil moved away from the town toward the distant railroad line. Walking beams by the hundreds pumped in a steady monotonous rhythm, and from a distance came a heavy roar as a well blew gas into the cobalt sky. They had just come to the edge of Kaster itself when they turned off on a red clay side road. Bent retained clearly the single glimpse he had of the town's main street. It had been packed from walk to walk by wagons, buggies, horsemen. He had glimpsed a long line of buildings, saloons and a couple of dance halls on the very first street. The sidewalks themselves were crowded by hustling, frantic people. Bent sensed the restlessness, excitement and the trigger-tempered edge of a boom town. He glanced back at Lennox.

"It's a ring-tailed town, all right. I don't reckon I'll have much time to miss cows and branding."

Lennox only shrugged and skillfully tooled the team into a crooked lane that led between oil derricks to the north. One place looked as much alike as another to Bent, all covered with oil-soaked frames pointing to the sky, but Lennox pointed to a long, low shack just ahead.

"That's us. You're now on Mitchell property."

He reined in the team beside the shack and painfully climbed down from the seat. The shack door opened and two men appeared. They were brushed aside by a girl, who came rushing out to Lennox and threw her arms around him.

"Ed! You're hurt! You've had trouble."

"A little, Paula. Ford and his boys tried

to work me over but didn't get very far. Paula, I want you to meet Bent Morgan."

Bent's eyes had lighted when the girl had appeared in the doorway. She was tall and graceful. Dark brown hair framed a delicate face, tanned a smooth brown. High cheek bones and dark brown eyes complemented a mouth, full and generous, the lips soft and inviting. Bent's heart had skipped a beat or two and then he had known sudden, deep disappointment when she had thrown herself into Ed's arms.

Now she turned to face Bent and came closer with Lennox. She was the sort of girl Bent had been looking for all his life, but Ed's arm was around her slim shoulders in a possessive manner. She belonged to him. Bent jerked off his hat and flushed.

"Morgan, meet Paula," Lennox said. "The finest sister a man ever had."

"Sister!" Bent's head jerked up and his voice held a note of glad surprise. Lennox looked sharply at him.

"That's right, sister. Who did you think she is?"

"Well, I—" Bent floundered, then shot a quick glance at Paula. She smiled, dark eyes dancing and Bent felt even more confused. She stepped forward and held up a slender hand.

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Morgan."

"Bent took a hand in my argument with Ford," Lennox explained.

"Then I'm doubly glad to meet you," Paula said sincerely. Her hand rested soft and warm in Bent's and he didn't want to let go of it. She dropped her eyes and disengaged her hand, stepping back to her brother's side.

"Bent, I want you to meet Mitchell and Patton. We've a lot of things to talk over."

BENT followed Lennox and Paula to the door, where the two men waited. One was tall and stocky. Gray, unruly hair topped a reddened, square face. Firm lips and a rocklike jaw marked a hard fighter. Bent liked the level gray eyes that travelled over him in a brief, all-seeing glance. Walt Mitchell, Bent knew, was the kind of man he liked to work for.

"Reckon we owe you a heap of thanks, Morgan," he said and his handclasp was crushing. Lennox turned to the other man.

"This is Rus Patton, Bent, the best damn lawyer in Kaster."

Patton stood tall and gaunt, dressed in a black suit that hung limply to his bony frame. His face was long, the chin prominent. He blinked brown, near-sighted eyes at Bent and his loose lips broke in a friendly smile. Patton looked as though he spent most of his life poring over heavy tomes of law. But for all musty air about him, Bent liked the man. The ugly face was open and honest, his grip firm and warm as he shook hands. He blinked around at Lennox.

"You say Ford himself started the trouble, Ed? Mmmm, might be we can clip that bird's wings. It's not often that Ford or Devlin show themselves personal."

"Get either of them in jail," Mitchell said in his hoarse voice, "and you've earned a thousand dollar bonus."

"It would be a pleasure without the bonus, Walt," said Patton. "They've been overdue behind bars for years."

As they entered the shack Bent saw that the small room served as an office. The steady sound of the drilling vibrated through the thin walls. Through a doorway, Bent could see a long, low room filled with oil well supplies and equipment. Drill pipe lay on long racks. Bins held the thousand and one small items of hardware needed to keep several wells going at full production.

Mitchell sank behind a scarred desk, pushed some invoices to one side, and placed his booted feet on the desk. Bent stood against the wall, just behind Paula, who sat next to Lennox. Patton stood by the window across the room, blinking steadily at Mitchell.

"I have full permission," he said dryly, "from the owners around us to run the line across their holdings. But we have to pump their oil to the railroad if the line's a success. You can start working toward the railroad any time, Lennox."

"Good!" Ed smiled and winced. Paula made a move toward him but he waved her aside. "My bruises and bumps can wait for later attention. Right now, I want to get Bent's job settled."

"For Morgan?" Mitchell asked, a touch of surprise in his tone.

"We'll need him, Walt, and a dozen like him. In time, our pipe will extend across the country for twelve miles. You know Devlin and Ford won't worry about the

law. They'll try to destroy that line any way they can."

"Unless we can get them in jail," Patton put in. Lennox made a negative gesture with his hand.

"Don't count on it. Now, I saw a sample of Bent Morgan's gun work. He had Ford and his men buffaloed and, for the time, eating out of his hand. I want Morgan to act as guard. First, here at the wells. Later, as the pipeline builds out, I want him to hire men he feels he can depend on to patrol the line—day and night."

Mitchell rubbed his chin and scowled down at the desk. He glanced up at Patton, who shrugged his scrawny shoulders. "A man may protect himself when the authorities are unable to do so," the attorney said drily. "That's one of the basic theories of law. I think we're in just that position."

Mitchell glanced sharply at Bent. "Like to handle guns?" he asked sharply.

"I can," Bent replied, "but it feels a heap better on my leg than in my hand. I never did see much sense in shoving a gun around plumb promiscuous."

"I can tally that," Mitchell nodded, pleased. "I never like to hire guns, for the gents behind 'em are generally proddy and plumb aching for a fight. That's no good. I don't want no man on my payroll to go out looking for trouble. Of course, if trouble comes up and spits in his eye, that's something different."

"That's the way I see it," Bent said quietly.

Mitchell looked around at Patton again. The attorney rubbed his bony hands together then passed his fingers nervously through his stringy black hair.

"Hire him, Walt. He'll ramrod the guards. If Bent does his job right, I'll see that you're protected legally. Morgan, you're not to make a move toward your Colt unless you or the pipeline, or any property is directly threatened. Is that understood?"

"I understand," Bent answered gravely. "I've always been a peaceful gent, but I've also believed in standing on my own two legs."

"You're hired," Mitchell said and his feet thumped to the floor. "Ed is in complete charge of the pipeline and you take orders from him. Paula, get that fool brother of yours home and put some beefsteak on that

eye. He looks like he augered with a tank car."

THE next weeks were busy ones for Bent Morgan and completely different from anything he had ever known before. Ed Lennox started to build the gathering system of the proposed pipe line. Mitchell had given him an unused tank of huge dimensions right at the edge of his holdings. From this, Lennox strung two inch pipe to Mitchell's storage tanks, equipped with small reciprocating pumps. The pipe was laid atop the ground, though Lennox hoped later to bury it to avoid the problems presented by extreme cold.

Bent watched the men work. The lengths of pipe were joined by a thread and collar method. A few other operators around the Mitchell holding had contracted with Ed to pump their oil and in a short time a whole network of pipes led from their properties to the big storage tank.

men to patrol the line as it pushed further toward Riata, men whom he felt he could trust, cowpokes like himself who put loyalty to their boss above every other consideration.

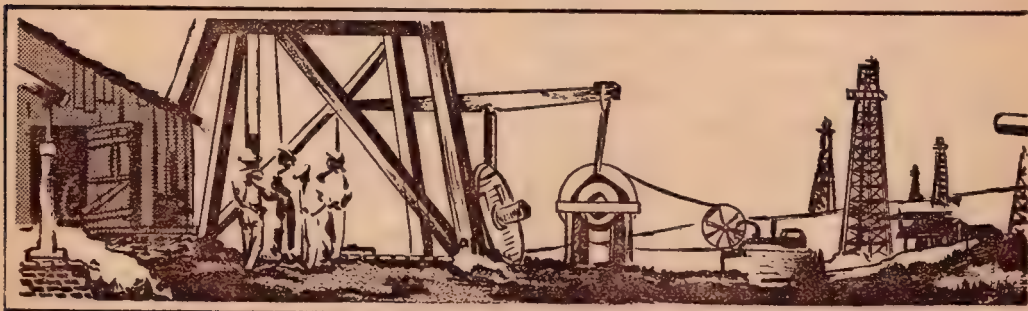
The line seemed to leap forward. Paula and Bent often rode its length, the girl excited and eager. Bent found himself looking forward to those rides. He'd feel a swift, warm glow when she'd turn eagerly toward him with a smile and speak his name.

One morning Paula rode up just as Morgan had swung into the saddle. She wore riding skirts and boots. A soft, open-throat shirt made her look sweetly boyish. Her hair was knotted loosely, looping to the back of her lovely neck from under the broad brim of her hat.

"Morning, Bent," she smiled. "Are you going to show me the line again?"

"Sure am," he grinned.

They rode away from the shack, through the field of derricks, the big pipe just to



In the meantime, other men had been building a huge pumping station. Boilers were installed and a big pump, steam driven, set up and connected by a huge four inch pipe to the storage tank. Then the real job commenced.

Surveyors had set the stakes, stringing them twelve miles to the railroad at Riata. Bent spent many days watching the surveyors choose the most level way. Then wagon loads of pipe rolled out along the line of the stakes, the Stringers dropping the lengths where they would be used.

Bent expected to see Faro Ford and get his first glimpse of the teamster boss, Ken Devlin. However, there was no sign of them and, to all appearances, they had no interest in this line that would break their rule over Kaster. Bent did not let this lull him into a sense of false security. He hired

their right. In a short time they were in the open country, only the black scar of the pipe leading in a gentle raise to a low ridge to remind them of oil. They topped the ridge and not far away they saw the men at work. They raced to the end of the line.

Big jack boards held the heavy pipe off the ground. As a new length of pipe was picked up, a swab would be run through it. Twice, as Bent and Paula watched, jack-rabbits popped out of the far end of the pipe and streaked off toward the far horizon. The pipe cleaned of dirt and the ever-present rabbits, was picked up. The thread joints were oiled and it was fitted into place.

A stabber lined it up with the pipe already strung and the stakes the surveyors had set. He checked to see that the threads were engaged perfectly without jamming or crossing.

Ropes were hitched around it and the gang rolled the pipe until turning it became difficult. Then big tongs were placed around the length, each pair worked by four men. One man beat the time with a hammer on the pipe, the sound a cheery clang in the clear morning air. To the rhythm of the hammer, the length was securely fastened to the line and the men moved on to the next stringer.

For a time Bent and Paula watched, fascinated by the smooth efficiency by which the heavy pipe was handled. It wouldn't be long, Bent thought, before reaching Riata, and that would mean the beginning of the end for his job. He stared morosely at the gang lifting a section onto the jacks. Paula's sudden exclamation made him jerk up his head.

TWO riders came toward the line and one of them looked familiar. Bent's eyes narrowed as the two came closer and he

Bent's curious look with a challenging stare of their own. The man's forehead was high, the brows massive, knotted now in a frown. He pulled up, one fist resting on his hip above his gun. His voice was sharp and clipped, used to giving orders.

"You're Bent Morgan?"

"That's the handle," Bent acknowledged evenly.

"I'm Ken Devlin. I've been wanting to take a look at you."

"Help yourself," Bent grinned crookedly. He felt himself tense under the piercing, weighing look. His own eyes jumped to the top of the ridge, expecting to sight some of Ford's gunhawks. Devlin didn't miss the play. He smiled, a mere lift of the corner of his lips.

"There's no more, Morgan. Faro and I can handle all the trouble you care to dish out."

Bent's eyes lighted and his voice drawled. "I ain't so sure of that. I remember once



recognized Faro Ford. His face set and he spoke swiftly to Paula.

"Get back towards home. I don't reckon they'll cause trouble, but you never can tell."

"I'm sticking," she said and her chin came up in a fighting angle. Despite his worry, Bent couldn't help grinning.

"Then try to stay out of trouble."

He rode around the end of the pipe and maneuvered the bay so that Ford and his friend could not avoid him. Bent could now judge the second man. He was tall and fully as large as Faro. Wide shoulders tapered down to a slim waist from which hung a heavy gunbelt. His well shaped head was carried at an arrogant, proud angle. A hard jaw buttressed a granite-like chin topped by a mouth that had the softness of a steel trap. Harsh, blue eyes met

Ford needed about a dozen gunslammers to beat up one man not quite his size."

Faro's coarse face flushed and his hand dropped down to his six. Instantly Bent's fingers wrapped around the handle of his Colt, though he didn't clear it from leather. Devlin spoke out of the corner of his mouth to Ford.

"Let it ride, Faro—this time. I reckon there'll be lot of chances to clip this rooster's spurs." The cold eyes jumped to the workmen. "I wanted to look-see at the line."

"Take your look but don't come any closer," Bent warned. Devlin flushed but said nothing. He quietly sat his horse watching another length of pipe fitted to the line.

Bent watched Devlin, wondering what was going on in the brain behind the cruel

eyes. Faro still glared hatred at Bent but he had moved his hand away from his holster. Time went on and Devlin still watched and said nothing and Bent became more nervous. He sensed trickery but neither of the men made a move. None of their henchmen were in sight.

A heavy boom like rolling thunder sounded and, involuntarily, Bent glanced at the clear sky. Then the meaning of it dawned on him. He twisted around in the saddle, looking back along the pipe line. A heavy pall of dust hung over the edge of the oil field.

"Dynamite!" he breathed. "The pipe line!"

Faro Ford threw back his head and laughed and Devlin gathered up the reins in his powerful hand. He nodded briefly at Bent, who watched with a stunned face.

"Adios, hombre. We'll meet again—if you still have a job."

CHAPTER FOUR

Bloodstained Law

BENT'S paralysis snapped. His hand streaked down to his holster and the heavy Colt jumped out. It lined on Devlin's stomach. Faro's shoulders jerked as though he had checked an impulse to match the play.

"Stand hitched, Devlin," Bent growled. "This is your work."

"Is it?" Devlin's heavy brows arched. He looked coolly at the Colt and then up into Bent's angry eyes. "I'd advise you to put that six away, Morgan. I've been right here all the time. Your own men and Miss Lennox are witnesses."

"Your men blasted that pipe line!" Bent raged.

"Prove it," Devlin answered shortly. Paula rode up, worry showing in her face. She touched Bent's arm.

"He's right, Bent. You can't hold him. Hurry! They'll need us down there!"

"Take her advice, Morgan," Devlin cut in. "I'm riding off now. Come on, Faro, let's slope."

Devlin deliberately neck-reined his horse and showed his broad back to Bent. Faro grinned in wicked triumph, bowed mockingly to Paula and then spurred after his boss. Bent watched them go, Colt still in his hand, feeling foolish. Devlin had been

right. There was nothing that he could do.

Paula's urging brought him swinging around. He dropped the Colt back in leather and spurred the horse down the pipe line. Both of them rode toward the oil field, both feeling a sense of foreboding.

The dust was still settling when they pulled their horses to a plowing halt where a milling crowd gathered around the line. Bent had a glimpse of Ed's strained face and then he saw some men bent over a sprawled figure. Two whole sections of the pipe had been blasted and the other lengths were twisted up in grotesque fingers pointing to the sky. Bent gave the line a single look and then hurried to the sprawled figure.

Walt Mitchell straightened as Bent came up. His movement gave Bent a glimpse of a white, dead face. One of the guards had been killed.

Mitchell spoke hoarsely. "Back shot out of his saddle. Them killing sons got the dynamite placed and set off before anyone could stop 'em. They sure took this trick."

"Did anyone see who did it?" Bent asked.

Ed sighed wearily and shook his head. "It happened too fast. They picked a spot far enough from the derricks to be safe. I wouldn't doubt but what Faro Ford was in this."

"He wasn't," Bent said. "I reckon we'd better get somewhere and talk."

They were a gloomy band as they rode toward the big pump shack. They dismounted and trooped inside. Mitchell had no more than dropped into his chair behind the scarred desk when Rus Patton burst through the doorway.

"I heard what had happened. Is the line damaged bad?"

Lennox looked up. "It can be repaired, but Devlin knew what he was doing. Blamed few oil men in Kaster will trust their crude to the line now. They'll remember this dynamiting."

"Any witnesses?" Patton demanded, striding disjointedly up and down before the desk. Mitchell sighed and shook his head.

"Ed believed Faro Ford did the job but Bent says he wasn't there."

"Faro Ford and Ken Devlin," Bent spoke up, "were at the far end of the pipeline. They were in plain sight of Paula and

me, and a good dozen workers when the blast came."

Patton slapped his fist into his palm. "They established an alibi. Devlin knows what he's doing."

"Too blamed well," Ed sighed. "Watch our contracts cancel as fast as the producers can get over here!"

Patton swung around, looked sharply at Mitchell. Walt, how far you willing to go to whip Devlin and put this pipeline through?"

"I'll spend every blamed cent I got," Walt answered and then shook his head. "But that sneaking son sure manages to play all the trump cards."

"Then start repairing that line," Patton snapped and his eyes blinked rapidly. "When the producers come, tell 'em not to worry about their crude. They can't lose."

"Why not?" Ed demanded harshly. "Devlin can use more dynamite."

"Because," Patton said slowly, "Walt Mitchell is buying their crude the second it flows out of their tanks." Mitchell's chair hit the floor with a thud but Patton went on talking. "They can't lose. Walt, you can sell it to the refiners at the end of the line for a penny or two more on the gallon. Once Devlin's whipped, you'll make a tremendous profit—though you're gambling your money until that renegade's out of the picture."

Walt stared at his attorney, wide-eyed. Then his lips pursed and he whistled softly. He leaned back, eyes narrowed thoughtfully. Ed Lennox sat stunned.

"You named it, Rus. You take care of the crude purchase contracts and I'll ride to Riata for a talk with the processors."

"What about Faro and Devlin?" Bent

asked. "I never like to see snakes run around loose."

"That depends on Ed," Rus answered. Lennox looked up in surprise and Patton rubbed his hands together. "It'll be an open declaration of war, Ed. I want you to appear before the sheriff and ask for Faro's arrest. Bent, you're needed, too. We'll jail Faro for his attack on the wagon and his assault on Ed. That'll hold him in jail and and I know what the courts will do."

"But Devlin?" Mitchell demanded.

"Once Faro is found guilty and given a sentence, the teamsters under Pop Sibley will get more courage. Ken Devlin will be so blamed busy holding them in line that we won't be much bothered with him. There's a chance Pop might get the upper hand, too, and then Devlin is done in Kaster."

"Ken and Faro won't take this laying down," Mitchell warned. Bent grinned and arose.

"I reckon we can take care of ourselves, and we might as well dab a loop on them before they figure up something new for us."

"Be careful," Paula exclaimed. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to either of you."

Bent felt his heart leap. Ed laughed at the red color that crept up Bent's neck and Paula flushed. Patton hurried them outside, Mitchell headed for Riata while Patton led the way to Kaster, Bent and Ed riding beside him.

THE sheriff's office was in a small brick jail around the corner from the main street. As they pushed their way through the crowd, Patton pointed to the bank and

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the line of freshly washed windows above it.

"Ken won't have to walk far to get in jail. That's his place."

The sheriff was a thin rail of a man, with a pointed face, long nose and shifty eyes. He listened to Patton and then heard Ed's story. He showed dismay when Faro Ford was named and Bent had the feeling that the lawman was not to be trusted. However, he agreed to arrest Faro Ford, though he tried to get Patton to bring a civil suit for damages.

"Ain't no use getting Ken Devlin's dander up," he argued, "by throwing Ford in jail. The other way, you can get damages and Ken can pay without missing the money."

"But he will miss Faro," Bent said sharply and leaned forward. His reckless blue eyes locked with the sheriff's and the man flushed. "You got an empty call, and I figure Faro will fit into it mighty nicely."

"I never knowed Ford to pull a thing like this," the Lawman said plaintively.

Patton blinked at the man and his voice held an edge of threat. "You know it now and you've got a job to do. Delay might start the court asking questions."

"Oh, I'll bring him in," the lawman came to his feet. He glanced at the clock. "I'll take him right to the court for arraignment. All of you can appear—say, in a couple of hours."

"We'll be there," Patton nodded.

There was plenty of time to spend after they left the sheriff. Ed wanted to buy some material destroyed by the dynamite blast and Bent suggested that he hadn't had a drink since he left New Mexico.

"We'd better stick together," Patton suggested, "so we'll be at the court on the dot. Devlin will use every trick in the book to free Faro. Let's get Ed's supplies, then go up to my office for awhile so I can be ready for the arraignment. After that, we'll take care of Bent's thirst and then go to the court."

It took them some time to buy the supplies and then they started for Patton's office. As they rounded a corner, Bent glanced back. He pulled up short, frowning. Ed and Patton turned, surprised. Bent shrugged.

"Thought I saw one of Ford's gunhawks trailing us, but I ain't sure. Too thick of a crowd and I never got another glimpse."

"You're getting nervous," Patton grinned.

"Could be," Bent admitted. He lifted the Colt and let it drop back in the holster. "That's just in case. Let's get to your law corral, Rus."

Bent remained by the narrow window in the office, overlooking the crowded street. While Patton busied himself, Bent's narrowed eyes searched the walks below. He saw nothing that seemed alarming. Of all those who passed, none took an interest in the small law office up over the general store. Bent began to think that maybe his eyes had played tricks on him. At last Patton closed his book with a snap and pushed back his chair.

"Dry work. I'll take that drink you mentioned, Bent. By the way, Ed, we can put Faro away for a year on the charges we're bringing. I think Pop Sibley and the teamsters will take care of Ken Devlin in that time."

The three men descended the narrow stairs to the street, Patton first, then Ed. Bent followed them. He didn't hear the first shot but Patton suddenly staggered, whirling half around. A yell of alarm sounded in the street. Patton started breaking in the middle. Ed stood transfixed but Bent jumped for the doorway, Colt leaping into his hand.

"Get moving, Ed," he yelled. "You're target bait."

His shoulder hit Ed just as a rifle cracked across the street. Ed fell against the door jamb, a stain appearing high on his shoulder. Bent saw a puff of smoke from the roof of a building across the street. A coarse, lumpy face showed for an instant and then disappeared.

"Take care of Patton," Bent yelled to Ed. He plunged into the crowd, clawing his way to the opposite side of the street. He cut to one corner of the building and raced down a narrow passage way. He reached the far end, rounded the corner and came to a plunging halt.

Faro Ford had just emerged from the rear doorway, rifle dangling loosely in one hand. For a split second both men remained frozen, eyes looking. Ford's fingers loosened and the rifle dropped to the ground, clearing both his hands for a swift draw.

"You don't deserve a chance, you killing

son," Bent said evenly, "but I'm giving it to you."

Watching Faro like a hawk, he deliberately dropped his Colt back into the holster and then waited, hand clawed out over the plain walnut handle. Faro's thick lips broke in a pleased grin.

"Thought you'd jail me, huh?" he sneered. "Well, Patton and Ed Lennox won't ever talk. You're next."

"Make your play," Bent said coldly. "It'll be your last one!"

Both men stood in a tense crouch. Abruptly Faro's hands slashed down to his twin guns. Bent's hand blurred.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pipeline Cowboy

GUN thunder rolled and smashed in the alley. Faro was fast and his guns spoke a split second before Bent. But he took no time to place his shots, depending on at least one or two slugs out of a hail of lead to reach their mark. Bent had twisted to one side so that he presented the smallest possible target.

His eyes were narrowed, lips flat against his teeth and set in a red gash across his face. A bullet tugged at his shirt, another passed through the crown of his hat. Faro's guns spat flame and smoke almost continuously, it seemed. As though in slow motion, Bent's six lined down and his finger whitened against the trigger. The gun bucked back against the palm of his hand and he saw a swift jerk of Faro's shirt over his broad chest. A second slug followed the first, slapping true into the mark.

Faro's eyes widened. Reflex tightened his fingers and both guns belched smoke, but the slugs flew wild and high. Faro came up on his toes. He opened his mouth to yell but no sound came out. His muddy eyes glared at Bent and then he collapsed.

Bent looked down at the sprawled figure, smoking six still in his hand. The harsh light left his eyes and for a moment he looked almost sorry. Then his jaw tightened and he ejected the spent shells from the Colt. He slammed in fresh loads, turned on his heel and hurried back to the street.

A crowd had gathered before the door that opened on the stairway. Bent saw the mean-faced sheriff and he grabbed the lawman's arm and swung him around.

"Why didn't you serve that warrant?" he demanded. The sheriff licked his lips, then seemed to realize that his badge gave him a certain power.

"I couldn't find Ford," he snapped. "I ain't seen him."

"You'll find him behind that building over there. But you can tear up the warrant. He's dead. He's the jasper that did the bushwhacking."

Bent gave the man no chance to reply. He shoved his way through the crowd to the stairway. Patton and Lennox were not in sight but the curious stares upward told Bent they had been moved back to the office. He fought his way upward and entered the room.

A doctor bent over Ed Lennox, putting the finishing touches to a bandage on his shoulder. Bent's eyes circled the room, came to rest on a still, blanket covered form on the leather couch. Ed Lennox cleared his throat.

"Rus is dead," he said, "and I'd be stretched out there, too, if you hadn't acted so quick."

Bent made a slight gesture with his hand to check any thanks Ed might want to make. His face was bleak. He had liked the lean, awkward lawyer.

"Faro Ford did the job from a building across the street. I got him. Devlin will have to fight us and the teamsters alone now."

He glanced at the blanketed form and sighed. "We paid too high a price, Bent."

WITH Faro Ford gone, Devlin seemed to disappear. There was no trace of him in Kaster. Patton was buried and Bent again patrolled the pipeline. The damage was repaired and the gangs shoved the line ever closer to Riata.

The producers, frightened by the dynamiting at first, quickly saw the advantage of selling their crude right at their own storage tanks to Mitchell and Lennox. It cut their hauling costs to Riata and the railroad, and placed that responsibility on someone else's shoulders. New contracts were arranged and Ed Lennox was almost cheerful again.

Mitchell had no trouble at all with the processors. They still bought crude as it was poured into the tank cars, and there was little difference to them who the seller

might be. Once the pipe line was finished and the big pump started pushing the crude through, Lennox and Mitchell would be sitting on top of the world.

Bent never for a moment forgot Devlin. Though the man had dropped out of sight, Bent knew he would make some attempt to recover lost ground. Devlin could not afford to let the pipeline wipe out his control of Kaster. His hold on the teamsters was weakening. Two days after Faro Ford had been killed, Bent saw some men riding toward him as he watched the work gang.

He spoke a quiet word to one of the guards and both of them moved out to meet the newcomers. There were four of them and their leader was a giant of a man with a wrinkled face, faded, blue eyes, and grizzled brows. A lump of tobacco bulged out one leathery cheek and his jaws moved in a steady rhythm as he shrewdly examined Bent. The others looked unused to the saddle, jerk-line drivers who should have been on the high seat of a freight wagon. The old man spit a stream of amber to one side.

"You be Bent Morgan?" he asked. He smiled when Bent nodded. "I'm Pop Sibley. Me'n the boys here have sure to thank you for eliminating Faro Ford. We figured we could sort of return the help—"

"How?" Bent asked and slouched in the saddle, the suspicion gone from his face.

"Ken Devlin tried to tell us this pipeline would put us all out of a job. We didn't much believe him, but he sure cracked the whip with his gunhawks. We lost some good men because we crossed him. Now we figure to rule ourselves."

"That's slapping a clean brand on," Bent nodded again. Sibley looked back down the long snaky line of black pipe.

"Devlin will try to bust up this line. We don't aim to let him. Some of the boys has decided to help you patrol it. They'd have pay enough if they got a chance to throw some slugs at Devlin and his gunslammers. How about it, Bent? Do we get the chance to show we want no part of lawless gunslinging and Devlin's ways?"

Bent smiled and extended his hand. "Send your boys around, Pop. I'm plumb pleased to meet you and mighty glad you're backing our hand."

That night Bent slept easier than he had in some time. The guards were strength-

ened by men who had felt the lash of Ken Devlin's cruel arrogance. They could be trusted.

The work gangs pushed on more eagerly and at last the pipeline dipped down the last descent and came to the railroad. The last coupling was made with the storage tank, owned by the processors. Their own pumps would lift the crude from here into their cars. Ed Lennox' responsibility ended at the tank. Lennox himself made the final connection. He stepped back and grinned at Bent, Paula and Mitchell.

"There she is! We'll start the crude on the way tomorrow. Walt, we got it licked."

"Sure looks it," Walt nodded complacently.

Bent frowned. "I won't believe it until I know Devlin's done. Now's his time to strike. I'm doubling the guards."

He was up most of the night, riding here and there along the line. News had spread in Kaster that the new-fangled line would start operations in the morning. Disbelievers scoffed and heavy bets were laid the idea wouldn't work. The curious came out to the pump shack but Bent's guards kept them at a safe distance.

Early the next morning, Ed Lennox started the pump that sent the first of the crude toward distant Riata. There was a tremendous crowd around the pump house, among them Paula, Mitchell and Bent. The boiler fires glowed and Ed busied himself with valves, a line of sweat beads standing out on his upper lip. A few minutes later the gauger, perched atop the storage tank, yelled down.

"She's dropping! Crude's on its way!"

Somehow the cheer that went up annoyed Bent. It's not there yet, he told himself grimly, and Devlin won't let it get to Riata if he can help it. He kept moving through the crowd, sharply watching for any of Devlin's tough hands. Every inch of the pipeline was patrolled, the guards doubly alert.

Ed watched the pumps work for awhile longer, then he turned the station over to an engineer with a few brief instructions. Most of the crowd had already dispersed and a whole stream of riders headed fast for Riata. They wanted to see the first of the crude pour out of the line and into the tanks there. The Pennsylvania fields were far away and they still couldn't quite believe

that this new-fangled method would work. "Come with us to Riata," Paula called to Bent. He shook his head.

"Not for awhile. I'm watching the line."

SHE rode away with Ed and Mitchell. Bent remained at the pump house awhile longer. Everything ran smoothly and only once did the engineer touch a valve. At last Bent swung into saddle and started away from the shack.

The first of the line guards grinned at him. "No trouble, Bent, none at all. I reckon Devlin has done give up."

"Not that jasper," Bent said sourly. He rode on through the field, following the line. He met the next guard, who had nothing out of the ordinary to report. Bent sighed and started rolling a cigarette. The paper and tobacco spilled from his fingers when he heard the gun shots. They came from the pump shack.

"Stand hitched," he yelled at the startled guard and jerked his horse around. He sank spurs and raced back, face grim and tight. Devlin had showed his hand. The gaunt derricks and the sinuous pipe line fairly blurred by as he raced through the field. More shots sounded, closer this time.

Ben at last saw the pump shack. Men struggled before the door and two were already down. Bent had a glimpse of Ken Devlin's giant figure, circling the fighting men. One of the pipe guards was down and

near him sprawled a gunhawk. The engineer and his assistant used heavy wrenches in protecting the entrance to the pump shack.

As Bent raced on, a gun blasted again and the assistant spun half around. The engineer was carried back inside as the renegades rushed him. Bent yelled and Ken Devlin whirled, startled. When he saw Bent, his lips broke in a crooked grin. He called over his shoulder and the renegades re-appeared. Bent knew then that the engineer had been downed.

One of the gunhawks slammed a bullet at Bent. It came close, singing spitefully through the air. Bent's own Colt answered and the gunslammer dropped. Ken Devlin ducked inside the shack and Bent realized the play.

The renegades would hold Ben off until Devlin had thoroughly destroyed the big pump. Desperately Bent spurred on, six blasting. Abruptly his horse fell forward as a bullet struck and Bent was thrown over the animal's head. He hit on his shoulder and rolled. He heard shouts from another quarter, but only dimly realized it.

He came to his feet in a crouch. Bullets smashed at him and he felt a hot brand across his left forearm. Two of the gunslammers dropped and Bent knew his own slugs hadn't touched them. A hoarse voice yelled from close by.

"We're backing you, Bent."



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It was Pop Sibley. Another renegade clutched at his stomach, bent double, and fell on his face. Devlin appeared in the doorway, face white and startled. His cold eyes instantly sized up the situation and he realized that he would not be able to destroy the pump before Bent and the teamsters would corner him. He slipped along the side of the shack, abandoning the last of his gunhawks to their fate.

Bent saw the move. His Colt covered Devlin and the trigger clicked on an empty chamber. Cursing, Bent snapped open the load gate. He started running to cut Devlin off. Sibley and his men could take care of things at the shack.

Devlin was now in the clear, running toward a nearby storage tank. He cut around the side of it. Bent snapped the last of the new loads in the Colt and his booted feet pounded in pursuit. He rounded the tank and saw Devlin reaching for the saddle horn of a long-limbed black horse. Bent yelled. Devlin threw a startled glance over his shoulder.

The man wheeled instantly and his gun thundered. Something struck Bent like a giant's fist, slapped him half around and turned his legs to water. He couldn't check his fall, but he hung grimly onto his senses. Devlin took a step forward, six still levelled, his cold eyes blazing with hate.

Bent saw the gun swing toward him. Desperately he tried to line his own Colt but everything moved so slowly, it seemed. His gun was almost too heavy to handle, but he read implacable death in the harsh eyes that glared at him. Both guns thundered together. Devlin's figure was hidden by a puff of blue smoke. A crushing fist seemed to smash Bent's skull and the world blacked out.

IT WAS night when Bent opened his eyes and looked up into Paula's worried face. Swift tears of relief came to her eyes and she leaned forward and kissed him. Her lips were cool and soft. Bent tried to put his arms around her but the sudden wave of pain made his brain reel.

When it had gone, Paula had straightened. Mitchell and Ed Lennox stood beside her. A lamp glowed softly from a table not far away and a gentle breeze stirred the curtains at the window. Paula saw the questions in his eyes and her soft fingers touched his lips, checking his speech.

"You've been shot up pretty badly, Bent, but the doctor said you will be all right again. Ed and I brought you to our home."

"You saved the whole shebang!" Mitchell boomed, and your Colt ace topped Devlin's last trick. We got us a pipeline, Morgan, and she works. Crude's pouring steady into the railroad tanks."

Bent smiled weakly. "Devlin?" he asked and Paula's fingers swiftly touched his lips.

"Dead," Ed answered. "Your last slug caught him plumb center. Bent, Mitchell and I decided to make you a partner in the pipeline. We already owe you more than we can ever repay, and we need a man like you. There'll be other pipelines in other fields. You'll be a partner and share in the profits."

"Let him rest," Paula said impatiently. Bent slowly reached up and took her fingers from his lips.

"I gotta ask a couple of questions," he whispered and his eyes softened as he looked at Paula. "I sure thank you and Mitchell, Ed. That's right nice making me a partner. What would you think of me as a brother?"

"Brother!" Ed exclaimed. Bent's eyes shifted to Paula.

Paula flushed and turned to the two men, shoving them toward the door. "Get out of here. He has to have rest. You can talk in the morning."

Ed braced himself at the door jamb and grinned impishly at his sister. He winked at Bent over her shoulder and chuckled.

"Give him an answer, Paula. Make it complete and full."

She did and Bent sighed happily, the tingle of her kiss still on his lips. He smiled.

"Pipeline cowboy. Who'da thought it!"

He drifted off into a peaceful sleep—this would be much better than any dream.

THE END



TAKE YOUR REST IN BOOTHILL!

By
Miles
Howard

Johnny and Bull knew
better than to try and
make explanations.



Instead of the hard-earned leave they both anticipated, that tough pair of lawmen were ordered to gun-clean the deadliest town along the Border. . . . However, the too-generous citizens of that roaring inferno insisted that Johnny and Bullneck take their vacation in Tranquillity's only peaceful spot — lonely Boothill!

JOHNNY ROGUE smiled sardonically. He smiled because he found the name of the town that lay not more than a dozen miles ahead very amusing.

Tranquillity. That was what Refugio County citizens had christened it long before the War between the States. And now although the War was nearly four years

over, the name Tranquillity remained. It was the most contrary name the hell-hole could have had.

Johnny and his old saddle partner, Bullneck Bill Brannigan had learned as much from Captain Jim Cartright in Santone Ranger Headquarters. Their graying chief had gestured at a letter on his desk when they'd come in from their last detail.

Both of them were worn down to the bone and about due for a spell of leave, but after listening to Cap Cartright they'd forgotten all about the vacation they'd planned.

Cartright's face had been grim as he'd tapped the letter on his desk, and explained its contents to lean, compact Johnny Rogue, and gray-haired, brawny, Bullneck Brannigan.

"Boys," he'd said, "they've lost six sheriffs down in Refugio County, and it's something that needs lookin' into. Juan Cortina is raiding across the border again, and it looks like he's got a pard on this side of the Rio who is aimin' on making Tranquillity his headquarters. If he succeeds, in six months there ain't goin' to be a rancher down there with a head of stock.

"This letter," he'd continued, "is from Nat Brandywine, an old friend of yours, and he wants me to send you boys down there with your badges in your boots. He'll fix it with the Town Council to have you, Johnny, hired as Town Marshal, so that you can keep an eye on the new sheriff they just elected. His name's Jake Kling, and Nat's got a hunch he's Cortina's kingpin on this side of the Bravo. There ain't no use in tellin' you this chore will be easy. It won't, but you'll be doin' Texas a mighty big favor if you can pin the deadwood on the right gent."

Bullneck Bill had licked his wide, scarred lips and grinned. "Ol' Nat," he drawled reminiscently. "Lord love me, I can almost taste his applejack right now. Why, I've seen him feed that thar stuff to a mosquiter and watched it grow big as a buzzard right afore your eyes. Come now Johnny boy, it's Tranquillity for us!"

DAYS of steady riding lay behind them now, and Johnny Rogue was just about as ready as Bullneck to sample some of Nat Brandywine's applejack. The sun lay hot between their shoulder blades, and heat haze shimmered across the range of

low hills their weary mounts were just starting to climb.

"Nat's place ain't more than a half mile beyond the summit, Bullneck Bill sighed, "and I for one am shore goin' to be glad when we git there. I guess I must be gettin' old."

But he wasn't acting old a moment later when the whip-crash of rifle-fire from the ridge ahead rolled down over them. Johnny felt a bullet pluck at the crown of his flat Stetson. He left his saddle like a cat dropping from a limb. His big gray, Bug-eye, knew the meaning of rifle fire too, and was quick as his rider in dodging behind the brush siding the trail. Bullneck hit the dirt alongside his younger companion, and all the tiredness was gone from his broad face. Black old eyes snapping, he squirmed to the edge of the chaparral that was sheltering them, then lowered his weapon.

"I can see the smoke," he grunted regretfully, "but she's out of Colt range. By damn," he continued, "if this is one of ol' Nat's tricks, I'll tan his mangy hide, and if it ain't one," his leathery brow furrowed with sudden worry, "it means he's in trouble. Nobody knows better'n Nat that the steers he's got hereabouts will be worth plenty up North at the end of the Chisholm Trail."

Johnny nodded and crawled to Bullneck's side. Silently he studied the ridgeline ahead of them, and once he thought that he sighted a sombrero as a horseman slipped carefully through the tall brush, angling past them. He kept watching and thinking about the truth of Bullneck's comments. It was in reality the reason they were here. For a time after the War, cattle and land had been next to valueless, and a man with a long rope and running iron could set himself up in business. But now cattle had value again—from two sources.

Packing plants had sprung up along the coast from Galveston Island to Corpus Christi, but the price for hides and horns wasn't a tenth of what the same cattle would bring at the end of the Chisholm. And the longhorns that found their way into the stinking vats along the Texas Gulf Coast weren't more than a part of the loss. There were other packeries across the Rio Grande, with Matamoras taking the biggest share of the 'wet cattle' crossing the river.

No questions were asked in Matamoras,

or by the lieutenants of Juan Cortina, who accepted delivery. The situation had gotten out of hand in the past, because Rangers were few and outlaws many. But now the Law had to gain control again. Murder and robbery, and rustling ruled this range, and the courage of a handfull of men who carried their badges in their boots was all that stood between honest ranchers and ruin.

As though he'd read Johnny's thoughts Bullneck grunted, "It ain't ever been easy to pick a needle out of a haystack, but we got to make the try. Outlaws can line their pockets with gold from hides, but an honest man that spent his dinero raisin' them long-horn critters has got to have Kansas prices to stay in business. So let's get movin'. Them whelps who fired that shot wanted time to get out of our way. Why, I dunno, but I aim to find out!"

No bullets greeted them as they rode cautiously into the road again, and straightened their mounts toward the ridge. Bug-eye snorted once and rolled his head, and Johnny watched his horse attentively. The big gray was all but telling him that eyes were watching them from the high brush on either side of the road.

"I can smell 'em," Bullneck growled, and his wide shoulders hunched until he seemed to have no neck at all. "Iffen they get the notion that you and me are Rangers, Johnny boy, we're goners."

ONE hour later, they were learning that even Brandywine could not help them, for the rancher was dead.

In the faint breeze that had followed them down from the hills his body swung in a kind of macabre dance, dangling from the limb of a cottonwood tree growing in the yard before his long ranchhouse.

"Ol' Nat," Bullneck's Adams apple moved spasmodically as they sat before the grim specter hanging from the tree. "God-a-mighty, he fought Injuns, Mexies, and Yankees, and now he meets his finish dangling from the end of a limb. It ain't right, Johnny boy!" and there were hot unashamed tears in the eyes he turned to his stony-faced companion. "So help me," he continued, "I'll never leave Refugio County until I pay off the whelps who done this to Nat!"

"Mebbe," Johnny gestured toward a cellar door that snapped idly beneath the kitch-

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en wing, "they wanted what was down there."

"Glory," Bullneck noticed the sagging panel for the first time. "That's where Nat kept his applejack—and dinero! There ain't no bank in this County a man can trust, and them as has a dollar keeps it about the premises. You suppose—"

"I suppose," Johnny said, and his voice was sharp as the crackling popper on a whip, "that the gent we're huntin' needed some hard cash, and mebbe some first-class red-eye to keep his crew in line. Or else he got wind that Brandywine sent for us."

"Either way we got the answer to the bullet that made us eat dirt awhile ago," Bullneck growled. "Nat ain't long dead, and we'd have rid in before they finished the chore if their look-out hadn't laid that shot over our heads—"

"No," Johnny cut in, "that ain't the answer, amigo. Mebbe you're forgettin' that we heard more than one hoss out in the brush. The whole bunch that were here ended there on the ridge. They spread out around us when we holed up."

"But why'd they head West from here?" Bullneck asked blankly. "Tranquillity lays south, and you'd figure it would be their goal."

Johnny shrugged, and swung down from Bug-eye. "If we knew the answer to that," he said quietly, "mebbe we'd know why they killed Nat in the first place."

"I'll be tellin' ye why they killed him in ten shakes," Bullneck prophesied. Like a big crab he moved toward the cellar door, and following him Johnny was not aware of the distant mutter of many hooves coming from the direction of the County Seat. Ducking his tall head, he moved into the cellar's dimness, and he saw that one keg, set on stanchions like a dozen others, had been smashed open.

Bullneck stood before it, gesturing, and his raspy voice was dry as the rattle of a sidewinder. "Thar's why Nat was strung up," he said. "This here keg was where he cached his dinero, but ye notice it's empty now. Dunno how much he was worth, but he was a long ways from bein' poor. He—"

"Get your hands over your heads," a gruff voice said from the doorway behind them, "unless ye want your needin's where ye stand!"

Johnny Rogue heard the dry click of gun-hammers coming to full cock, and he knew better than to try and make explanations. The time for that might come later—

THERE were twelve men in the yard, and not a friendly face in the group. Johnny glanced at Bullneck, and the old Ranger shook his head. "We're goin' to be keepin' Nat company," he said softly, "unless we do some tall and fancy talkin'. Golly, thar's the new sheriff, as fancy a dressed dude as I've ever seed!"

Fading sunlight struck Jake Kling's bright silver star. Tranquillity's seventh sheriff!

With the hard muzzle of a Colt prodding him, Johnny stepped toward the group. His eyes studied Tranquillity's new badge toter, and he wasn't particularly impressed with what he was seeing. The man was tall, and lean to the point of emaciation. His lips and cheeks were bloodless, accentuating the blackness of the thin mustache beneath his long beaked nose. Eyes dark as the mustache peered from cavernous sockets. He was dressed like a dude in fancy fawn-hued breeches, and hand-stitched boots. His shirt was white silk held at the throat by a black string tie. The sheriff, Johnny thought grimly, didn't look like the type Nat Brandywine or his friend would choose to rod the law in their county.

And yet another quick glance at the men grouped about the new sheriff was enough to convince him that they were all good, respected Refugio County citizens.

It was all puzzling. Johnny Rogue asked himself a question as they paced toward the group. How did it happen that these men had arrived so shortly after Nat Brandywine's death? One answer crossed his mind like the crack of a whip. Some one of the dozen men in the yard had known the killing was going to take place, and arranged this ride so that Tranquillity citizens could get a first hand look at what happened to men who tried to buck the new order. Finding them here was the only thing that individual couldn't have expected. But Johnny and Bullneck could easily be accused as the murderers.

He watched the dude lawman, long hands resting lightly on the butts of low-slung Colts, step a pace forward, and a mocking, smile lifted one corner of his mustache.

"Gentlemen," he drawled in a smooth, cultured voice, "this is an unexpected pleasure. We certainly never expected to find Nat's killers this quickly."

"And just what," Johnny asked coolly, gave you the idea that Nat might be dead in the first place?"

The bearded rancher behind Johnny said in tones of utter grimness, "Mister, if ever a man was marked for death it was Nat. He's led the fight against you outlaws that are tryin' to take over our town, and I've heer'd more than one threat spoke ag'in him. Jake Kling, here, stepped into our last sheriff's shoes, and it was him as suggested we ride out and talk Nat into coming to town where he'd be a heap safer than settin' out here all alone."

Bullneck Bill Brannigan spat tobacco juice that narrowly missed the sheriff's polished boots. "Nat," he said, "didn't need airy wet nurse when I knew him, and I misdoubt if he needs one in Hell. Howsomever, I know he'll be right glad to see the gents who strung him up fryin' in the Devil's furnace, and I aim to see they get thar if it's the last thing I do!"

Jake Kling spoke with a mirthless chuckle. "You'll be the first one he'll have the pleasure of watchin'."

"Nada," Bullneck shook his graying head, "not me, or Johnny Rogue here. We ain't got a livin' sign to prove it, but we un's happen to be Rangers, sent here at Nat's request. Danged convenient, him bein' too dead to interduce us proper." He stared intolerantly at the group, black old eyes snapping. "Why, dagnab sech a bunch of lunkheads, anyway! If ye'd got busy and read sign around that thar cottonwood ye'd see the shape of more'n two pair of boots in the dust, and if ye'll ride back along the road we jest travelled you'll see fresh tracks headin' t'other way from here."

"Rangers? You?" Kling's hooded eyes swept them from cracked boots to dusty Stetsons. "You look like a pair of saddle tramps to me. Gentlemen, I'll leave it up to you!" His eyes covered the dour ranchers. "My advice is to hang this pair as they hung Nat Brandywine!"

It was a powerful plea, and Johnny knew that he had to do some fast talking if they were to live. He spoke quietly before any rancher could add his say. "You can hang us," he told them, "and the fact that we

ain't the ones who killed Nat won't matter until you get strung up yourselves. The more old-timers that are dead, the easier it's goin' to be for the Cortina's pard on this side of the Rio to take over your town and your ranches."

Watching the dour faces of this hang-noose jury he could see some change in sentiment, and he drove home his point while he had them wavering.

"You're twelve against two," he said scathingly, "and you got our guns. 'Tween you, I'd say yuh ought to be able to keep a purty close watch, and if we do try and take a powder I dunno what's to keep you from gut-shootin' us. So what have you got to lose by back-trackin' the bunch that really strung up Nat?"

"It's awful easy to hang a man," one hard-bitten old rancher said to no one in particular, "an' he stays hung an awful long time. It's the kind of mistake you can't unmake."

Another grunted, "You're right there, Sam. Dunno there's any reason to be in a hurry. T'won't bring Nat back to us—"

Johnny was watching the new sheriff of Refugio County, and he saw the man's thin face smooth like a good gambler's. His lathy shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Won't be dark for three hours," he said flatly. "Let's get goin'."

JAKE KLING was changing his tune a heap sight too readily. The thought struck Johnny like an unseen fist, and he straightened as he felt the pressure of the revolver against his spine relax. The sheriff was acting like a man mighty sure of himself, mighty sure they'd never be able to track down the bunch that had hung Nat Brandywine.

Some of the group had turned to bring up the horses, and Johnny threw one quick signaling glance at Brannigan, and he knew the old Ranger was ready to back any move he made. Their own guns were belt-looped over the arm of the man behind them, and Johnny took one quick step backward. He felt his high heel crunch down on the Refugio rancher's instep, and a howl of pain was his answer as he sidestepped and twisted. The rancher was bending forward in agony, his own gun forgotten. Their Colts looped over his left forearm were sliding toward his fingers.

Johnny Rogue moved like an unwinding spring. Reaching, he grabbed their gunbelts. Bullneck, acting as though they'd rehearsed it, was leaping toward their own mounts which a rancher had led forward with the rest.

A Colt flamed almost in front of him, and Johnny felt lead streak past his cheek. Through gunsmoke, he saw Jake Kling's face, and the man was smiling with the cold pleasure of the born killer. Johnny swung the belted Colts like a flail, and one heavy holster caught the sheriff across the bridge of his beaked nose and drove him backward.

Bug-eye was between them then, and Johnny made a grab for his saddle-horn and swung to leather. Bullneck was already in saddle, and Johnny tossed him a belted Colt. Dust smoked up beneath the feet of frightened horses. Ranchers cursed and tried to dodge into the clear to get a shot at the fugitives as Johnny fed steel into Bug-eye's flanks.

Twisting in his saddle, he sent a mocking challenge back at the Refugio men. "Adios, amigos. We'll see you in Tranquillity—"

The pursuit was organizing behind them before they reached the main road, and Bullneck twisted to survey his young companion. "An' that was a fool thing to say," he yelled, "and a fool stunt to pull. Why dang it we purt near had some of them gents convinced that we were innocent, but ye'll never make a soul in Refugio County believe it now. Why, hell, I'm bettin' ye we could a trailed that killer bunch with the help of them gents who'll be trailin' us now. Of course," he ended scathingly, "I'm gittin' kinda old, so mebbe you wouldn't mind tellin' me why yuh got us in this jackpot—"

Johnny swung Bug-eye back toward the hills, and he eyed their brushy crests with grim favor. The chaparral thickets were solid enough to afford shelter for fifty men. That posse, mounted and in full chase behind them now would have trouble trying to track them once they reached the brush, and that was just the way he wanted it.

"Bill," he drawled, "whenever I've got in a tight I've allus figured the best way out was to do the thing folks least expected. *Mebbe* we could have trailed the bunch that took the pot shot at us this afternoon, and

mebbe we couldn't. And here's why I doubt it. *Jake Kling was too danged ready* to fall in with your suggestion that we go huntin' the gents who strung up Nat. He knew that if we didn't find them we'd stretch hemp and there'd be no more attention paid his friends."

"Glory," Brannigan muttered, "yuh may have it right at that."

"I aim to try and prove it!" Johnny snapped, and his smoke-gray eyes were glittering slits as he turned to study the hard-riding bunch behind them.

"How we goin' about it?" Bullneck asked.

"Hit for the ridge," Johnny said. "We'll trail the trailers once they spread out a mite. Iffen they don't split up I've been playin' the wrong hunch. Iffen they do it'll be at Kling's orders, and he's the hombre I'm goin' to be right anxious to foller. He'll be by hisself, I'll lay you that, because where he'll be going he won't want company!"

THEY left the trail at the crest of the hills, like rabbits seeking cover, and Johnny Rogue, grinning like the young devil some men called him, spread tall chaparral with his arms, and edged Bug-eye into the heart of the copse nearest the trail. Grumbling, Bullneck followed him, and swung down to grasp the muzzle of his mount.

"Johnny boy," he grunted, "if we ain't kotched here like weasels in a hen-coop, I'll never go ag'in ye again so help me."

"I'm honin' to hear what Kling will have to say to his pards when they hit the top," Johnny answered softly.

The sun had fallen below the western rim of the prairie as they'd climbed the ridge road, and now dusk was sweeping in swiftly to mantle the hills. It would make detecting them that much more difficult, Johnny thought, as he listened to the increasing thunder of hooves, for in the gathering dark and the thickets one man would be hard to distinguish from another.

"Hold up," Jake Kling's voice came plainly from the head of the road. "Here's where we better separate. Spread out. Every man take a section and we'll flush that pair of killers in a hurry. First shot any of us, hear, we'll all head for it."

"We'd better not miss 'em," one dis-

gruntled rancher growled. "Iffen they give us the slip, ol' Nat ain't ever goin' to rest easy in his grave!"

"Mebbe they'll haid southwest toward Moreno's, that breed place," another rancher said thoughtfully.

"You can't see Moreno's from the road—" Was there a trace of alarm in the sheriff's voice. Johnny wondered—"So they won't know he lives off thataway. But he ought to be notified to keep an eye open for 'em, so I'll haid down there myself."

"Fair enough, Jake," another of the men agreed. "Meantime I'll promise yuh there won't be one hunk of brush we don't pry apart. Let's get a-moverin' boys. Them whelps are gittin' farther away from us every danged minute we waste argifyin'."

Johnny listened to the group, and one hand stayed close to his gun until all sound of horses faded.

Brannigan was swiping at his face with a red bandanna. "Boy," he murmured, "I could feel the flutter of heavenly wings. Don't you never git us in this kind of jackpot ag'in."

"You're lappin' it up like a cat lickin'

cream," Johnny chuckled. "Lets us ride back to the road and mosey down to the foot of the hill. Sounded like Kling went that way in a hurry. Mebbe he jest wants to make sure nobody gets to Moreno's rancheria ahead of him."

MORENO'S RANCHERIA lay in the throat of a spreading canyon and Johnny could see that the man's adobe house was surrounded by tall, feathery cottonwoods, which denoted the presence of water.

Silently Johnny led the way into the cottonwood grove, and then he froze in mid-stride, Colt lifting.

"Don't start nothin'," a rusty whisper advised. "I'm friend; not foe, amigos. Only danged fools, or men on the right side of the Law would have tried that getaway you pulled off at Nat's. Furthermore, I noticed our new sheriff seemed right anxious to ride here to Moreno's alone, so I jist up and followed him. My name is Hake Clive, and I been a friend to Nat Brandywine for nigh on thuty year so—"

"What have you seen here?" Johnny cut the cattleman short.

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"Plenty," Clive said softly. Jake Kline's inside the house, and I ain't so sure he's alone. There's a bunch of fust class bronses out in the corral behind the place but they look plumb tuckered. Like mebber somebody is restin' 'em up for a run to the border. This could be—"

"I know," Johnny said, and he moved forward through the trees as he spoke, a thin, young wolf of a man, flanked by two battle-scarred old lobos. His voice held a faint note of recklessness as he spoke. "We'll go right in and join Moreno's company. Leastways I will."

A half dozen long strides carried him across the last stretch of open yard.

Johnny's left hand found the latch on the door. He sprung it, and pressed the oak panel inward, wondering just what they would face.

One man sat at a table in the center of the long narrow room, plaiting a riata by lantern light. A woman's lumpy shape was turned away from them in a bunk at the opposite end of the room. A baby whimpered beside her.

"Senores—!" the brown-skinned man kicked back his chair and rose. "What ees the meaning of this intrusion?"

"Save the act, Moreno!" Hake Clive said from the door behind them.

Johnny heard the sullen click of gun-hammers coming to cock as he started to turn, and he knew even before Clive spoke again that they'd been tricked like a pair of simpletons.

"I'm turnin' in my badge when we git back to Santone, Bill," he said disgustedly.

"Make that double!" Bullneck Brannigan agreed. "I'm jist as bad as you. Step into my parlor says the spider to the fly, and we've done it. Clive, you blasted skunk, why don't you shoot us and git it over with? Mebbe in Hades we'll git some of that tranquillity yore town is supposed to pervide."

Hake Clive chuckled. Johnny thought the man sounded right pleased with himself, and he forced his body to relax. A man with tight muscles could not move as fast as he might have to within the next few seconds.

"Moreno," Clive drawled from the doorway, "go and let the boys know that we're ready for 'em. Hell's waitin' for these Rangers—"

Johnny watched a white smile widen Moreno's lips, and the border breed turned swiftly toward the thick inner wall. He rapped twice on what looked like a smooth, solid surface, and Johnny Rogue guessed that the hidden door probably opened onto stairs leading down to a cellar room beneath the house. He had just the time it would take for men to climb the stairs, and he moved with all the sudden savagery of a *javelina*.

As he whirled toward the door, he glimpsed Clive's startled expression, and knew the man had not been expecting any defiance. Surprise and nervousness governed Clive's first shot. Johnny felt it pass above his plunging shoulders, and then his long arms closed about the border-hopper's knees.

He heard the fall of the other's Colt as the force of his plunge drove Clive backward. "Grab his gun, Bill!" he panted, "and give them hombres comin' up to meet us the kind of reception they deserve—"

He struck ground solidly, but Clive was beneath him cushioning his fall. The man's rocky fist drove short, savage blows into his face. Johnny grunted and brought his knee into the other's groin. He heard Clive groan, and then the sound of shots drowned the man's moan of pain.

"We've been double-crossed—" he heard Jake Kline howl, and then Colt fire drove the words back down his throat.

"No more'n us," Bullneck Bill Brannigan chanted. "Only we 'uns turned the trick around. The rest of yuh git back down to your cellar," he added savagely, "and fer as I'm concerned ye can rot there. But Johnny now, he's a kind-hearted feller. He'll probably ride into Tranquillity and bring back a posse with a rope. Hangin's more legal, but yuh stay jist as dead!"

Johnny was grinning as he lifted himself from the writhing shape of Clive. "Hold the fort, amigo," he called. "I got me one rope recruit right here, and I aim to take him into town with me. Won't be no doubt in folks' minds about what's been goin' on here once he starts singin'—"

And as he jerked Hake Clive to his feet, Johnny Rogue heard Bullneck Brannigan mutter thoughtfully, "I guess Hell is goin' to have to wait awhile longer afore it gits these Rangers—"

Thicker Than Blood!

No wonder all the youngsters in Jackson Falls were awed by Billy Poindexter—Wasn't he the only kid in town with two fathers. . . . One a whiskey-crazed convict who had just busted jail—and the other a duty-bound lawman whose only conscience was a smoking sixgun!

By Richard Brister



"Stand still," Rafe swore. "You want your hide full of buckshot?"

BILLY POINDEXTER got the news about Rafe at nine in the morning, and for a while, it made him a kind of a hero. Though a mighty uncomfortable hero, because even if Rafe was his pop, he was living with Sheriff Jud Thompson

now. So naturally the news pulled him two ways.

Mr. Carlisle had let them out for a ten-minute recess and they were fooling around in the Jackson Falls school yard, yelling and running like kids will when you turn

'em loose. Billy was "it" in the tag game, and chasing Bucky Jensen, when suddenly everything stopped, and he looked around to find them all staring at him and whispering, like he had a rip in the seat of his pants or something.

"What's the matter?" Billy asked.

Harry Vandam, the new kid from back east who always got a hundred in spelling, was the one who spoke up. His eyes were goggling a little as he stared at Billy. "Somebody just drove by in a buckboard and said your pop broke out last night, Billy."

Billy winced. Leave it to Rafe, he was thinking. He never thought of Rafe as his pop, really, just as another fellow, sort of, a fellow who seemed born to get into all kinds of scrapes, mostly because of the bottle. Rafe used to treat him like dirt, until they'd stuck him in the jail for stealing Luke Daly's prize pig, last August. But after all, whether Billy liked to think it or not, Rafe *was* his father, and the thought of Rafe being out of jail scared him, plenty.

"Y-you sure?" he stammered.

"Of course I'm sure," Harry said righteously. "He near choked old Dan Portney to death, when Dan was handing his supper in to him. Then he swiped the keys and got away clean as a daisy."

The other kids were watching Billy, nodding soberly, and admiring him sort of, because their fathers never did anything so romantic as choking somebody near dead and busting out of a prison.

"What you gonna do now?" asked Bucky Jensen. "Jeez, you're in some spot now, ain't you?"

Doggone it, Billy was thinking. Doggone the luck, anyhow. If only he hadn't agreed to live with old Jud while Rafe was serving his sentence out, this wouldn't make such a problem for him. He should have known better. He should have just lit out of this part of the country on his own hook. He was fourteen going on fifteen now, and he could have made out somehow. But no, he had to go soft, and let them argue him into living with old Jud. Jud was a decent enough old duffer; he tried hard to be friendly.

But the fact remained, Jud was the sheriff, the same sheriff that had stuck Rafe behind bars in the first place, and Rafe hadn't taken it kindly, when Billy agreed to

live with the old bachelor lawman. Rafe would whup him good on that account, next time he laid hands on him.

Mr. Carlisle came out of the tiny schoolhouse and rang his bell like he was trying to shake the clapper loose from it. "Come," he said in his high pitched voice. "Come, now. Recess is over."

Billy hesitated, then started running at a slow jog away from the schoolhouse.

Mr. Carlisle's voice grew startled. "Billy! Billy Poindexter. Where do you think you're going, young man?"

Billy yelled inanely, "Nowhere, I reckon," and just kept on going. He realized that this flaunting of authority was making him a hero again in the eyes of the others, but the thought didn't warm him. He was too full of his own problem, and he hadn't an idea in the world about what he could do to make things any better.

WHEN he had run about a quarter-mile, he sat down at the side of the dirt-and-gravel road to think things over. He knew one thing. If Rafe was out, his first thought would be to get his hands on a good bottle of drinking likker.

He couldn't get anyone to give him a drink in town, naturally. The only place, Billy reasoned, where Rafe could get a drink with any safety at all, being he was just new-broke out of jail, would be out at the shack they had lived in, on the Jackson Pass, two miles east of the town. Rafe had bottles hid out all around that old shack, and with a two-month-old thirst to drive him, he'd sure beeline it out there. Billy had no illusions about Rafe at all, when it came to the older man's drinking habits. Rafe just had to drink.

All right, so he'd go straight out there and start drinking himself near blind and crazy. That was for certain. How about Jud? Billy wondered. Well, he'd lived with the old sheriff two months now, and he knew Jud was smart enough to figure out that same answer as to where Rafe would head for.

Billy got up and set off toward Jud's place in town at a ground-eating trot. He didn't know what he was going to do, exactly. But he had to do something. The sheriff was going to think he'd taken on a parcel of mountain cats, if he went out there to bring Rafe in while Rafe was still drink-

ing. Billy didn't like the old man a whole lot—after all, he'd stuck Rafe behind bars in the first place—but Billy didn't want Jud's blood spilling either.

And as for Rafe—well, no matter how you tried to get around it, and reminded yourself of his ugly temper, Rafe *was* Billy's father.

Billy went busting into the house, breathing like a bellows that had just sprung a leak, and found Jud sitting in the Morris chair in front of the fireplace. He was cleaning out the bore of his old Sharps rifle, and there was a sober look in his pale watery eyes.

He glanced up with some surprise when Billy came busting in on him. "School out already?"

"I'm taken a half holiday," Billy said, looking down guiltily. "Listen, Jud, you ain't goin' out there totin' that gun, are you?"

The old man smiled gently, and his long, rust-red mustache quivered. "Thought you was goin' to start callin' me Uncle Jud, lad. Jest plain Jud's kind of—impersonal, ain't it?"

"Mebbe," Billy said stubbornly. "You ain't my real uncle. You took me in, when Rafe—got into trouble. But—listen, don't go out there to the shack right off, will you? It'll only mean trouble. One or the other of you'll catch lead. Rafe's mean, when he's drinkin'."

Jud sighed. "I'm the sheriff hereabouts, boy. I've got my duty. I know how you feel, Rafe bein' your pop, but—"

"He'll pepper you sure. If you'd wait till this after, when he's drunk hisself full, you might jest come up on him sleepin'."

The sheriff stroked his ram'shorn mus-

tache, and pondered. "Can't do it, boy. The law can't afford to wait, or even listen to reason. For all I know, he could be lightin' right out of the county, while I'm here chewin' the fat with you."

He rose, a ponderous, tall figure, and slouched toward the door, holding the Sharps in the crook of his elbow.

Billy breathed hard. On a sudden impulse, he dashed up behind the old man, grabbed the butt of the rifle and yanked it away from Jud. He stepped back warily with it, and when Jud turned those sad, watery eyes on him, Billy pointed the gun straight at him.

Jud took a step forward. "Now," he said. "Now, what kind of hijinks is that, for a boy fourteen. Crossin' the law don't get a man nowheres in this life, son. Reckon your pop could tell you somethin' about that side of it."

"Reckon he could," Billy said. Jud shouldn't have said that. It was a timely reminder of Billy's grievance against him, and it made Billy stubborn as a pack mule. "I know you got to go out there," he went on. "It's your job, and I don't blame you for lookin' at things the way you do, mebbe. Only, you ain't goin' out till later on. I'll keep you here, Jud, less'n you'll make me a promise."

The sheriff's face reddened. It was not fitting for a county sheriff to be held at bay by a fourteen-year-old youngster. He stepped forward and put his long arm out. "Give me that gun, boy!" he rumbled.

Billy jerked it threateningly toward him and placed his finger within the trigger guard. "Get back, Jud. I ain't foolin'. You gotta make me that promise."

Jud read the nervous excitement, the

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near hysteria on Billy's face, and showed good judgment. He stood where he was and he put his arms down. "What promise?" he grumbled.

"If you gotta go out after Rafe right away, go out without totin' a gun. Rafe's pretty mean, some ways, but he's no killer. He ain't never shot nobody, not up to now. He just might take a crack at it, if he's full of redevye, and you come agunnin' for him. But he'll listen to reason, if you go out there unarmed and try to talk some horse sense into him."

Jud's pales eyes searched Billy's face. Gradually the anger sifted away from the aging lawman, and a wondering, proud look came into the weathered features. "You're a gutty youngster, Bill. I'll say that for you. Could be, what you say makes sense. You know Rafe a sight better'n I do."

"Then you'll do it?" Billy said eagerly. "Gee, Jud—"

"Didn't say that—yet!" Jud snapped. He went on more gently, "Glad to see such a strong streak of loyalty in you. You mean right, I guess. You're sort of in-between on this here situation. Can't say's I blame you, for actin' proddy." He shrugged. "All right. It's a bargain. I'll do it, your way."

BILLY had lived with Jud Thompson long enough to know that the old man's word was good. The sheriff was famous for the scrupulous honesty of his dealings with friends and foes alike. Billy put the gun against the wall and lifted his shoulders. "Thanks," he said. "You won't have no cause to regret that."

Jud looked fondly at him. "You're a good boy, son. Too bad you didn't get more of a break in this life. With a decent home, and a decent set o' parents—"

"Don't you say nothin' against my folks," Billy flared. "I don't have to take that kind of talk from you nor nobody, Jud."

The old man looked tired. "I'm a dang fool with my tongue," he clucked ruefully. "Never get you to callin' me Uncle Jud thataway, will I? I'm right sorry, Bill. I didn't mean nothin'." He turned through the door, unhitched his tall roan from the rack outside, and was abruptly away in a cloud of dry dust along the sleepy main street.

Billy watched from the doorway. Jud

had treated him mighty fair, in that little set to. Sometimes he almost liked the old man, but whenever he got close to feeling that way, Jud let drop some remark about his pop, or the way Rafe had raised him. That reminded Billy that it was Jud who'd caught Rafe stealing that shoat, and then stuck him in prison, and then Billy hated Jud much as ever.

Well, it would be all right now. Jud didn't have a gun on him, and he was a powerful smart talker, and he'd make Rafe listen to reason and go back peaceable to finish his time out.

Then a dismaying thought came to him. What if Rafe was just drunk enough to feel real proddy and mean, the way he got sometimes when he'd had just enough drink to make him think he was some sort of a king or a tyrant or something? Rafe could get awful mean and low-down, at a certain stage of his drinking sessions.

He had a gun out there at the shack, and he might—he just might take it into his boozy brain to resist arrest. He might even kill the sheriff, being Jud had gone out unarmed, on Billy's say-so.

Holy cow! That would be awful, Billy thought. Then he'd have Jud's blood on his hands, for all practical purposes. He didn't want anything like that. It would be bad all around. Rafe would be deeper in trouble, and Jud would be dead or wounded, and Billy wouldn't be able to sleep a wink with his bad conscience about it. He still wasn't fond of Jud, not a bit of it, no matter how the old man tried to win him over, but he didn't really dislike the old duffer.

He had to do something, he suddenly realized. And fast!

He scrambled outside to the sheriff's stable. The gray gelding was in there, and Billy slapped a saddle on him so fast the horse didn't quite know what had happened. He knew a shortcut to the shack, a tricky little trail that would cut miles off the distance, and at least a half hour. If he rode like a wild man, he could get out there a good forty minutes ahead of the sheriff.

Jud was getting along. He never pushed himself, on the trail, unless it was something real urgent.

He pushed the big gelding to the absolute limit, and he came into the clearing around the shack like a rider for the Pony Express. He jumped off and just went

busting right into the house without any warning. That was foolish, he realized at once, because there, in the center of the room alongside of the pot-bellied stove, stood Rafe.

He had a shotgun in his hands, and he looked ugly. His eyes were bleary with booze, his clothes were filthy, and he could hardly stand. But he had that gun trained on the door.

Billy watched him take his hand away from it, and wondered weirdly how close he'd come to getting a blast of buckshot through him.

Rafe said curtly, "You, is it?" His voice took on a sneering inflection. "Figgered you'd be up to the schoolhouse about now, learnin' your readin' an' writin'. Got some high and fancy since you been took in by the sheriff, ain't you?"

"I ain't high and fancy. I got to go. If I try to hide and stay away, they come lookin' for me."

Rafe was not mollified. "Fine son you are. Goin' to live in the same house with the lawman that shoved your old man in jail." He put the gun under his arm, went to the deal table at the head of his dirty bunk, and poured a stiff shot of whiskey from a bottle into a grimy tumbler. He lifted it to his lips, and drank it down in two deep gulps. He turned back to face Billy and grunted, "Come here."

Billy didn't budge. He knew that tone

of voice. Rafe meant to crack him one on the side of the face, because he had 'taken up with' the sheriff.

"Come here!" Rafe thundered.

Billy shook his head. He had recaptured his wind a little, and he didn't mean to take any licking from Rafe. Not right now.

"I'm through lettin' you whup me, Rafe. I ain't done nothin' to be ashamed of."

Rafe fingered his bristly, grimed chin and stared open-mouthed at him. It was the first time Billy had ever stood up against him. The liquor was working strong in him, and it helped his hot temper to burst its bonds.

"Why, you young no-count little range gopher, I'll bust your head off you. I'll learn you how to sass back at your pop. I'll—"

He came toward Billy. Billy backed away, circling around the small room, playing a game of tag with him. It wasn't hard to keep away from Rafe, in his condition. He was stumbling all over the place, catching onto the furniture to keep his balance. His red eyes kept blinking and glowing with increasing rage. He brandished the shotgun.

"Stand still, I tell you. You want your hide full of buckshot, do you?"

BILLY still dodged away from him. Time was passing, he was thinking. Before long, the sheriff would be riding up,

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and then anything might happen. Rafe wasn't likely to shoot his own son, not even drunk as he was, but he'd blast away at the sheriff without much thinking. Billy had to get clear of Rafe, and get that gun away from him, somehow.

Rafe lifted the gun and pointed it straight at him. His eyes were mere slits, and his grubby face was set in a mask of drunken frustration.

"Stand now. I ain't foolin'."

Billy watched his finger go in and touch that trigger. He felt his heart turning flip-flops. Rafe would really shoot, not intending to, but there was no telling what might happen, him in *his* condition, and fondling that trigger. Billy stood still, and Rafe stepped in toward him.

Billy took his chance, when Rafe was one step away. He swept a hand out, jabbed the gun muzzle aside. It went off with a thundering burst that near broke his ear drums, but he was under it, out of harm's way. He grabbed the still-smoking barrel, yanked it away from Rafe, and let it keep going through the air behind him. It came up against the board wall of the shack, and dropped with a clatter into the coal bin.

Rafe swore like a wild man. He lurched forward, his arms outstretched, meaning to catch Billy in a crushing bear hug. Billy backed away, and jabbed a hand in his pocket. He yanked out his jackknife, and turned the blade out. He brandished it at Rafe and said thickly.

"Reckon it's my turn to do the talkin' Rafe. Now you stay back, or so help me, I'll take a slice off you."

Rafe was too drunk to get the idea. He came lunging in. Billy never had really intended to use the knife on him. He saw what he had to do. He flung the blade from him, grabbed up a heavy chunk of wood from the pile alongside of the stove, and brought it down hard on the top of Rafe's head.

Rafe had his disreputable old felt hat on. Otherwise that blow might have done him some real nasty damage. As it was, it only put him out of commission. He went down like a sack of potatoes, and lay on the floor, unconscious.

Billy grabbed him under the armpits, dragged him over to the bunk, and spread him out on it. That way, when the sheriff

came busting in, he'd think Rafe was just passed-out drunk, like Billy had promised, and he'd take him back to the jail without any trouble, or any more heads broken.

Billy had done all he had to do, and he made tracks fast. He put the gelding up, when he reached town, then went back to school until the noon recess. Mr. Carlisle gave him a dressing-down for the way he'd acted, but Billy just shrugged it off. He was used to Mr. Carlisle's criticisms.

When he got home at noon, Jud had his eggs and his fried potatoes going in the skillet, and was acting just like nothing had happened.

"Rafe back in jail?" Billy fished casually.

"Sure is. You were right, boy. Found him sleepin'-drunk, just like you figured. Wa'n't no trouble at all, takin' him in."

"That's fine, Jud," Billy said gravely. "He's my pop, an'—an' you been good to me. I didn't want no shootin' between you."

The sheriff looked soberly at him. "No more did I, Bill." He went across the room, opened Bill's drawer in the high dresser, and dropped something into it. Turning, he spoke again, and his voice had a plaintive note in it. "Reckon it could be Uncle Jud from now on, mebbe?"

Billy tackled his grub with a slow shake of his head. He still had his grievance against this man. The fact they'd teamed up to get Rafe back to jail was a poor kind of bond between them, Rafe being his father. And besides, Jud didn't even figure Billy's part in that ruckus out there.

Before he went out again, he took his arithmetic homework out of his dresser drawer, and he stood there a long time, staring at something in the corner sitting atop of his folded blue jeans. It was his jackknife.

That was what Jud had dropped in there so casually, when he'd gone over there and opened the drawer while Billy was eating. His head was spinning, thinking about where he'd left that knife, where Jud must have found it.

He turned to go, and as he got to the door, Jud said casually, "Goin' back a'-ready?"

"Yep," Billy said, gulping. "Sure am, Uncle Jud." He turned down the dusty street, his eyes brimming a little.

The Shorthorn War

Griff Paulus knew that as soon as one of his whitefaced critters grazed in the family's sacred longhorn pastures, he would be disowned forever. . . . But once committed to an idea the young rancher couldn't be swayed—come hot-lead, hell, or Uncle Will!

By
Stuart
Friedman



The next moment he was
flung forward in space.

“HELLO, Uncle Will,” Griff Paulus called.

Will Sterling inclined his head. But he didn't speak as he and his daughter rode into camp. Griff shifted his

eyes to the girl as she brought her mount up.

“How are you, Ada?”

Silently her lips formed Griff's name. It was as if she were afraid the slightest sound would break the uncompromising

mask of her father's face and set hell loose.

Griff was aware of the sudden tension. There was a sudden tightening to his mouth, and a slight backward movement of his short-cropped bare blond head.

"Don't call me Uncle," Uncle Will spat, swinging out of the saddle. His eyes blazed. "I'm glad your daddy never had to live to see this," he said slowly. "His own flesh and blood turned against Will Sterling."

Will doffed his hat and ran his fingers through sweat-matted hair. He stared at Ada as she dismounted. He had a blank expression on his face. Suddenly he spun around facing Griff.

"Griff Paulus, I'm sorry I ever thought of you as part of my family."

"Dad!" Ada cried. "How could anything make you say that?"

Griff lifted one hand. "I—" He looked down, then fumbled makings out of the pocket of his blue cotton shirt. "I don't think you should have said that—not *that*."

"I'm sure he didn't mean it, Griff," Ada pleaded.

She turned and stepped close to Griff, laying one slim brown hand on his and lifting her head. It rose gracefully above the soft, flowing line of her shoulders and throat, and it was capped with rich, dark hair brushed back and tied at her neck. He remembered when Uncle Will had adopted her after her real parents had been killed by Indians. They had grown up together. She would come to him with wild tales of her skills and fearlessness. Then she would wait, frowning like this, challenging him to doubt her. In those days he'd answer with jeering guffaws.

"You know Dad. How could he mean it?" she said.

Will looked chagrined. "I'm sorry son, I didn't mean it. Honest."

"I know it," Griff said, a corner of his mouth quirking as he smiled. He studied the cigarette his nervous fingers had botched and then saw it fall apart.

Ada laughed out loud.

"**O**NE thing we've got to say for Griff," Uncle Will said, slapping Griff on the shoulder. "He knows what business we're in. Cows! Send him up to Dodge with a market herd. Sells 'em off. Then what's he do with the money? Buys more cows—dang it, boy, that's loyalty to the cow

business. But in the Lord's name Griff—"

Griff waved his hand toward the herd. "You know these aren't just ordinary cows—"

"I know," Uncle Will said, irritably, "Herefords! Sheepfaces. I can't hardly stand to look at them. I've been hearing about this blasted herd of shorthorn white-faces for weeks from outfits that passed you. I been putting off coming uptrail to look for myself, 'cause I didn't want to come mad. What got into you, Griff? This is *longhorn* country. Well, thank God, no harm's been done that can't be undone."

"I only did what's got to be done," Griff said. "We've got to upgrade."

Uncle Will tilted his head, grinned with one eye nearly closed. "I get it now, Griff," he said playfully. "Young, bustin' to show old Uncle Will you fit full-size britches. But you're my partner, too, Griff. You never consulted me about spending the whole proceeds from the market bunch."

"Dad needed that money, Griff," Ada said seriously. "I know you didn't mean it that way, but—you didn't act like a gentleman."

"The market money this year was mine," Griff said, flushing. "You promised that, Uncle Will. Remember?"

Will's eyes seemed to retreat, leaving only blank, dark shells. His cheeks lengthened coldly, and he straightened his spine.

"I didn't know," he said with icy precision, "that the only place in the state of Texas where my credit was no good was in my own house!"

"You should have brought the money home, Griff," Ada said hastily. "I know he owed you some from last year, but still it was your place to deliver him his share of this year's sale. You simply appropriated it, as though you didn't trust him to lay hands on it."

"I needed the money," Uncle Will said. "I planned to ask to borrow again to pay a debt—a debt of honor!"

Griff's eyelids narrowed. "A gentleman's debt? Another gambling debt you mean!"

Uncle Will creased his hat with an angry sweep of his long fingers. He put the hat on, bobbed his head tersely.

"I do," he said. "I've fixed it so I can get the money. The bank wants to stock a

spread they just took over, and they'll buy this herd."

"Let them buy some of our longhorns," Griff said.

"Everything on our place is mortgaged to them already. This herd is clear, and they'll buy it for cash. If they took longhorns they'd only apply credit to what we owe. It's cash that I need!"

Griff took a deep, uncomfortable breath and wet his suddenly chalky lips. He had known there would be trouble when he started this show. He had to see it through. It wasn't a job a nephew could do. He had to be a partner, now, for the first time. This wasn't easy.

He remembered his father's warning, just before he had died. Griff's father had had to ride herd on Will Sterling to keep his gambling from busting the P-S outfit. P-S was big. It had brought in a lot of money. Uncle Will thought it was inexhaustible, and that his gambling was simply the weakness of a gentleman. There was a nice swashbuckling quality about it that charmed daughters—and nephews. Then, last year Uncle Will lost the whole proceeds of the herd money in one grand splurge.

Uncle Will had waved the matter aside, airily. What did three thousand cows matter when P-S was running ten times as many? It mattered plenty! Because since Griff had become partner, Uncle Will had already borrowed to the limit on everything they owned. When Griff had tried to talk like a partner, Uncle Will laughed and reduced him to nephew. Griff had showed

him the books. For four years their longhorns hadn't brought in enough to break even—because the scraggly range cows had to be sold to feeders. The feeders got the profits. The stockyards buyers were getting more fussy each year. They were buying good solid beef cows. They were buying upgraded longhorns, and shorthorns. In another five years not even the feeders could bother with the little, half-wild 'horns, hide and hoof' breed.

"I WON'T sell these cows," Griff said quietly. "If I give them up, we'll be just that much farther back. I'm tired of seeing the P-S brand headed for sure ruin with nothing being done to stop it."

Uncle Will's face went pale under its tan.

"You'd throw me down for them outlander sheep-cows!"

"No," Griff said, bluntly. "This herd's worth twenty thousand dollars. You surely don't need that much—"

"Almost," Uncle Will said crisply. "But I won't argue. Have you made your decision?"

"We'll get a loan on this herd," Griff said swiftly. "Pay part of your debt now—and the rest later. That way we can keep the cows and upgrade—"

"If I'm owed, I want my money," Uncle Will said sharply. "If I owe, I pay—in full!"

"This is your country, Griff," Ada said coolly. "Or have you forgotten about honor—"

"Honor!" Griff said hoarsely. He cleared

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his throat. "Why should I give over the whole damn future of the P-S to some tin-horn gambler?" Griff paused. The slant-lines from the corners of Uncle Will's mouth were deep, and his lips were white rimmed. "If it's a debt of honor, let him wait with honor. But damit—I *won't* ruin us!"

"I'm pulling out," Uncle Will said abruptly. "I won't be known as a welcher. I'm going to the bank and tell them to call in their loans on the P-S. Liquidate the whole outfit. I'll start with nothing. But clean."

"You'd sell me out—just like that!" Griff said, snapping his fingers.

"The bank will buy this herd."

"And after that?" Griff cried. His face was flushed and his hands worked uncontrollably. "You pay your debt, and the P-S is worse off than ever, with no chance to upgrade. Next year you'll still not be able to see past your nose. You'll pile up more 'gentlemen's' debts."

"Make your choice, Griff," Ada said, her voice scathing. "Without so many speeches."

"All right," Griff said, his voice in tight control. "Kill the P-S fast. Close it out. That's better than seeing it die by inches. But your gambler friend doesn't get this herd. You owe me, too. I'm taking this herd."

"Come along, Ada," Uncle Will said, as though he hadn't heard Griff. "We'll go down and rope out fresh horses and ride back. We've got to see the bank people and the sheriff."

"You're not going anywhere, Dad," Ada said sharply. She turned from him to Griff. "This isn't a problem for outsiders, Griff," she said softly. Then her eyes were warm on him, tender and a little sad. "Oh, Griff, don't break us up. Please don't, Griff. . . ."

"You know me too well," Griff said. "I don't want to bust us up. I couldn't—"

She took a long breath. "This is a time to speak out, Griff," she said. "I've never thought of a future with any man but you. You've said you love me. I love you . . . what does the word mean to you?"

His voice rose sharply. "Ada, that's no fair thing to bring into this. . . ."

She cut in. "Just once prove you know what the word means. Love! Good solid stuff. Big enough to plan a life together on.

Big enough to sacrifice a little stubborn pride for!"

Uncle Will was several yards away now, leading the saddled horses upcreek. Griff stared at his back, his lips tightly shut.

Ada said in cold fury, "That's your answer? Nothing?"

She whirled to go. Griff caught her arm. "You listen," he said. "First, I'm to take out my backbone and hand it to your daddy. Then I blind myself to what's happening in the cow business, and let the P-S fall back like an old drag cow. I just sit back and let us go to hell, throwing out my self-respect to boot. If you'd be satisfied with the carcass of me that was left after that, you're not the woman to satisfy me. Go tell him to see the bank and the sheriff, or who he damn well pleases. I'm driving my cows home. As to him having the bank call in its loans and ruining us—I think he's bluffing!"

There was an ache in Griff's throat as he watched them start out. He wanted to stop them. He lifted his hand, then let it fall.

They were pushing through the long bands of shimmering heat that rose from the sage brown plain—going out of his life. Uncle Will. Ada. His only family. He didn't feel strong any more, or right. Nothing had ever hurt like this. If only he could make himself believe he was in the wrong . . . then he could give in. More than anything, now, he wanted to yield, and to heal quickly this terrible aching. . . . He watched the sea of heat waves draw them farther and farther from him, unable to stop them, because he was right, *right!*

THE sun had set, though it was still light. The herd was bedding down after a six mile push during the afternoon. The P-S punchers were talking and lounging around the fire, finishing supper coffee when the half dozen riders appeared from the south.

Griff walked toward them as they pulled up by the chuckwagon. Only one of them dismounted, a tall man with a long face that came to a point at the chin. Griff watched him open his saddlebag and take out a folded paper. He saw the man's nervousness as he came to him, clutching the paper with long, colorless fingers. He was long-legged, but he walked with such short steps there might have been hobbles on his expensive boots. Griff noted the "L. M."

initials stitched into the boots' pale leather. The man stopped an arm's length from Griff, his blue-gray eyes sliding to the .45 holstered at Griff's hip. He glanced up at the young rancher.

"Griff Paulus?"

Griff nodded.

"I'm Maddern. I own this herd. I've come to take it!" He paused. He held the paper out in front of him at eye level for a moment. "Here's the bill of sale. Will Sterling's signature is on it."

"Mine's not," Griff said in a low but firm voice.

"Will Sterling said for you to sign," Maddern said. "He owes me seventeen thousand dollars. I've waited long enough. I want these cows without trouble. I've already got them sold to the bank, and they expect delivery tomorrow. I brought my own drovers."

Griff looked past Maddern to the waiting riders. They all wore pistols, and a rifle hung in a scabbard from every saddle. Maddern himself wore a pair of guns on crossed belts, and now he let his right palm run suggestively over the carved walnut stock of one of them. There was dead quiet in back of Griff, and he knew the P-S hands were listening and waiting. Whichever way the men sided, there might be a carry-over of hard feelings once things settled between Griff and Uncle Will.

"I won't sign that sale bill," Griff said

at last. "And you can't get your money unless I do. But—"

"Somebody will get hurt," Maddern warned. "I'm not playing, Griff Paulus."

"Let me finish," Griff said coldly. "I'll go to the bank with you and Uncle Will. We'll get a loan. Enough to pay you half. You'll have to take a note for the rest."

"I've got a note. I want cash."

"If you had a note you'd do this legally," Griff said.

Maddern's gun whipped out. It was a signal. Instantly the guns of the riders with him were unholstered. Back of him, Griff could hear the sudden rise of anger. There were mumblings and slow quiet curses, and the sound of boots moving. Maddern's eyes focussed on the P-S men back of Griff.

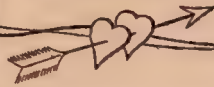
"Keep away from them guns," Maddern said sharply. "Will Sterling don't want your guns in this. I'm warning you. I've fooled longer than I aimed to. One of you make a move, and you'll be a dead man."

"Give me the sale bill," Griff said. "I'll sign it."

Pen and ink were brought. This wasn't the P-S punchers' show. Griff didn't intend to get their blood spilled on his account. Uncle Will had realized that, Griff guessed. This was a smart trick of Uncle Will's all right, and right now there wasn't much Griff could do about it. Still, there was a trick or two they hadn't figured. A corner



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of Griff's mouth moved in a smile as he signed.

"That's better," Maddern said, waving the ink dry. "Now, the bunch of you move on—pronto!"

GRIFF had known for an hour that Maddern and one of his riders was following him. They kept pace with him, just out of rifle range. Now that Griff was within five miles of the county seat, Maddern must know his plan. Maddern had suspected before, and had ridden a way with the homebound P-S hands. As soon as Maddern headed back for the herd, Griff had struck out alone for the county seat. He had gone no more than a mile before Maddern had been on his trail.

Griff turned in the saddle. The two riders were topping a small rise of land, their bodies clearly outlined against the night sky. As he watched they bent over their saddle horns and their mounts shot forward. Griff lay forward, yelled sharply and slapped his hat against his horse's side. The animal's neck stretched, and his hoofs dug in for a split second before catapulting them forward.

His mount moved at a dead run, mane and tail streaking, ears nearly flat, his head pushed out so far it was no higher than his shoulders. Griff was nearly deaf with the race of wind and the drumming impact of hoofs on the hard ground. He kept up a sing-song of encouraging shouts in rhythm to the quick slaps of his hat. They plunged down a small incline, veered sharply around a small stand of scrub pine, then followed a long curve up the opposite slope.

The swift rolling lift and fall of his horse's gait became labored, and he was losing ground on the upslope. Maddern and his gunhand were making time down the grade behind, spurring and rein-whipping their horses furiously. As Griff came into outline against the sky on the ridgetop a rifle cracked. He didn't hear the bullet. He made the plain and spurred ahead.

He intended to see the sheriff, and Bicely, the bank president. Maddern knew it. Maddern knew that Griff would ruin the herd sale once he reported that he'd been forced at gunpoint to sign the bill of sale Maddern held. A signature obtained that way was illegal, and the bank wouldn't touch such a deal.

There was a whine of sound close to his ear like wind through a crack. At once a second bullet ripped the air. In the same instant there was a harsh sound like the slashing scrape of a knife edge across a skillet as a bullet struck his stirrup iron. Vibration from the impact stung through his boot and raced over the whole left side of his body. For a moment Griff regretted that he hadn't pushed a showdown with Maddern before. He checked the thought. That would have meant a gunfight involving the P-S punchers. He'd sidestepped a fight that would have spilled their blood. This was his show. He was going to beat Maddern out of those cows. When that was done there was a personal score to settle with Maddern.

ONE moment Griff was a part of his racing horse, sailing effortlessly, his ears estimating the rifle bark and whine. The shots grew fainter, the bullets gashing harmless furrows in the ground, yards back of his mount. The next moment he was flung forward in space. He went rolling and twisting through the air, finally landing on his back. There was a hot knife of pain in his left foot and ankle as he sat up. He saw his boot was gone—held in the stirrup. His ears were pierced with the piteous cries of his horse, on his back and thrashing feebly with three of its legs. The other leg was motionless. Griff started to crawl toward the animal's tossing head. He felt for his gun, but his holster was empty.

Maddern and his gunhand were coming fast. Griff began to search the nearby ground for his gun. He had another weapon in the saddle, but there was no chance of getting it. His suffering horse rolled now from side to side. The packed earth under Griff was vibrant with the spasms of the dying horse—and the telegraphing of those swiftly approaching horses. There was no moon and though a thousand stars shone, and the dome of sky was pale, little light reached the earth. Griff crouched, turning frantically looking for his weapon. He ran to a small stand of bunchgrass, began to thrash into it with searching fingers. His heart jumped suddenly as the steel came under his touch.

The two riders were within twenty yards. They slowed for more careful aim. Griff ran at a crouch to his horse, flipping the

safety catch of his gun, rolling the empty chamber to the left, lining a .45 bullet into the magazine. The guns from horseback sounded sharply, sending forth vicious yellow fangs of flame and trailing sparks. Griff sent two roaring shots directly at them, ignoring the faceful of fine dirt their bullets had sprayed. As he shot he moved. He lay two feet from his horse, levelled his gun and fired once. The horse was mercifully dead. With a single spasm it rolled onto its side.

It was as if the animal's screaming had held off the ominous sound of the riders. Now, in the comparative silence, their approach had a deadly sound. They came as a swift, wild pocket of thunder and lightning as hoofs drummed the earth and guns ribboned the night with fire and vicious jabs of sound. Griff fortressed himself behind the saddle of his dead horse, and emptied his gun at them. The horses reared and wheeled, one struck out east, the other west, with Griff in the center of their gun pocket.

HIS body whipped around at the tick of a muffled bolt being locked. The rider in back of him levelled the dimly glowing barrel of a rifle toward him. Griff's gun exploded twice. A rifle bullet entered the ribs of Griff's dead horse with a *thunk*. The rifle that had fired it fell to the ground. The gunman pitched soundlessly from his saddle, lay motionless. Griff left his shelter at a dead run. The riderless horse stood numbed, then bolted. Griff leaped, caught a rein and yanked the animal's head down. His stockinged foot was in the stirrup, and he was in the saddle a second later. He wheeled the horse, set out after the other rider, vaulting the dead horse in his path.

Griff leaned out, fired at the rider waiting with aimed rifle fifteen yards ahead.

There was a yell of pain that was Maddern's voice.

"Throw that gun down—" Griff began, but Maddern had already dropped it. Griff holstered, drove straight at Maddern's horse. Maddern spurred his mount and tried to run for it. Griff pulled abreast, drew his gun and buried it in Maddern's side. "Pull up!"

The two horses stopped, stood panting.

"Hand over that bill of sale!"

Maddern complied, silently. Griff tore it up. Then both of them stared south and listened. A large body of horses was coming. In a second the riders were visible, a moving dark patch.

"What's the shooting about!" the sheriff called some time later.

"He give you trouble, Maddern?" Uncle Will said as the horses came to a stop.

"Started shooting us up—killed one of my men," Maddern cried. "He tore up the sale bill, Will."

"A poor loser you are, Griff," Uncle Will said quietly. Then to Maddern. "It's all right. I'm going to give you a note, Maddern. I inquired and found you can get Judge Orr to issue a writ of attachment on the note. The sheriff'll take over the herd for you, legally."

"Thanks, Will."

The sheriff had taken note of the killing and then spoke, "Meantime, Paulus and Maddern better come back to town and make statements about all this shooting."

"I wouldn't want you to charge the boy with murder, Maddern," Uncle Will said. "I can't believe he done that. Call it a shoot-out, with both sides to blame."



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"I guess that's how it was," Maddern said.

"If you say so," the sheriff said, "it don't look like I can charge him with outright murder."

"I guess not," Griff said. "But let me tell you, Uncle Will, Maddern isn't going to get them whitefaces."

"Oh, I reckon he will," Uncle Will said jovially.

"I'll get riders," Griff threatened. "I'll take over that herd."

"Wouldn't shoot down any of the P-S boys would you, Griff?"

"Don't need to," Griff said.

"You'd have to," Uncle Will said, laughing. "I'm going to send them up for the herd, and have them drive the cows onto P-S range."

"I'll be there before them," Griff said hotly. Inwardly, he smiled as he watched Uncle Will lean toward the sheriff, whisper something.

"You're under arrest, Griff," the sheriff said.

"When you cool off, Griff," Uncle Will said. "the cows will be on P-S range. Sheriff here will come with Maddern's writ of attachment, and Maddern can then sell the critters and get the money I owe him. No hard feelings, boy. You fought and you lost—so now it's done. Let's patch 'er up, and go back to bein' a family."

"No hard feelings?" Griff said warily as Uncle Will rode near, thrust out his hand.

"No hard feelings. Win, lose or draw." They shook hands.

GRIFF had finished lunch in his cell. He lay on his cot, smoking, looking at the bars-striped square of clean sky past the window. Uncle Will was stomping and bellowing behind him.

"I wish I could get through these bars," Uncle Will threatened. "I'd turn your backside up, and—"

Griff dragged his cigarette, blew a lazy funnel of smoke above him. "Win, lose or draw," he reminded, "remember—no hard feelings."

"You tricked me. You made me think you were going to try and take over that herd," Uncle Will said exasperatedly.

"I wanted to take them," Griff said, "and drive them onto our range . . . just like

you had done for me. I admit I wanted you to drive 'em onto P-S—"

"You made me believe different," Uncle Will stormed. "So all the time I was working into your trap."

"I never sprung the trap," Griff said. "I only called Mr. Bically to come over from the bank. I told him somebody was thinking of attaching some of the property that was on our land. So, naturally, the bank had to see to it that nobody carried off property that the bank part-owned. The bank holds mortgage on everything in P-S bounds."

Griff got up, mashed out his cigarette. He said seriously: "They'll loan you what you need, Uncle Will. At least, enough to pay Maddern half. I explained that we was planning to upgrade a little more each year. So they figure the P-S is going to be worth more backing, if—"

Griff paused, saw the muscles around Uncle Will's mouth working for control.

"If?" Uncle Will said harshly. "If what?" He exhaled, and the tension seemed to go out with his breath. He laughed. "If I stop gambling?"

"For five years," Griff said hurriedly. "Try it, Uncle Will. Try my way. The bank wants to see us get on our feet—and so do you. The P-S means more than a deck of cards."

Uncle Will's hand came through the bars. He looked at Griff solemnly as they shook. "To the P-S," he said. "The Paulus-Sheep ranch." He exploded with laughter. "Danged if you ain't turned me into a sheep-herder—when the hell are they going to let you out of here? I need you at home. Ada won't speak to me—"

"She will now," Griff said. "She was here to sympathize with me. She found out that you were the one who got tricked—now she won't speak to me." He chuckled fondly.

"Again?" Uncle Will laughed. "Well, I'll talk to the sheriff and get you out of here so we can go to the bank and get that loan. Maddern's waiting. He was sore about taking less than the full amount. But he calmed. I told him take it or talk to you. He's not anxious for that."

Griff shrugged. "Just keep him away from whitefaces," Griff said, then amended with a grin. "Our whitefaces!"



Sixgun Masquerade

By JHAN ROBBINS

"Say, Junior, does your mother know you're out?" the brawny bartender mimicked loudly. . . . How was he to know that the quiet, pink-cheeked youth was Billy the Kid?

FOR NEARLY six weeks the Alhambra Saloon in Albuquerque had been bone dry. The thirsty miners had sipped moodily of lemonade or been forced to blast their vitals with pulque. Wagons wrecks had smashed two shipments of whiskey, more precious than the silver that bought it. Business had been awful.

But now the brawny bartender hummed softly as he polished a new supply of gleaming brown bottles. He turned the lantern wicks down low and swished a brace of beer mugs through a murky pail of rinse water.

Slowly, the saloon filled with the drifters of the night. Five men leaned against the bar. In a corner two peaceful poker games had started up; it was nearly like old times.

Through the batwing doors pushed two young men—strangers. One was dark, the other fair. Both walked with a horse-man's rolling tread, and both packed guns. But the extreme youth on the face of the one made the bartender snort scornfully.

The fair-haired youngster heaved his foot onto the brass rail and piped, "Double rye."

The bartender leaned across the mahogany plank, thrust his chin into the lad's face and mimicked, "Say, Junior, does your mother know you're out?"

For the next thirty years, the bartender told his children, and then his grandchildren, "Yep, that's what I said: 'Say, Junior, does your mother know you're out?' How was I to know he was Billy the Kid?"

If the bartender was unaware of the destiny of the smooth-chinned youth before him, he promptly got a broad hint. As the deliberate insult, delivered in a high, falsetto voice, impressed itself upon the young

rider, the Kid, then known as just plain William Bonney, answered the taunt by snaking out his shotgun.

The bartender was astounded, but not too surprised to dive for the sawdust. The Kid flung him a contemptuous glance and emptied a volley of shots into the tower of gleaming bottles on the shelf. His gunfire boomed out under the low roof. Whiskey and splintered glass showered into the air.

His gun empty, the Kid vaulted over the bar and smashed the remaining bottles with his gun butt. Meanwhile, his companion, an older Mexican named Gomez, drew one gun and covered the men in the saloon. Billy the Kid snatched the other from its holster on Gomez' left hip and yelled,

"Dance, damn you!" He began to pepper the floor at the bartender's feet. With bullets spitting at his toes, the unfortunate man leaped up and began to hop up and down with much enthusiasm but small grace.

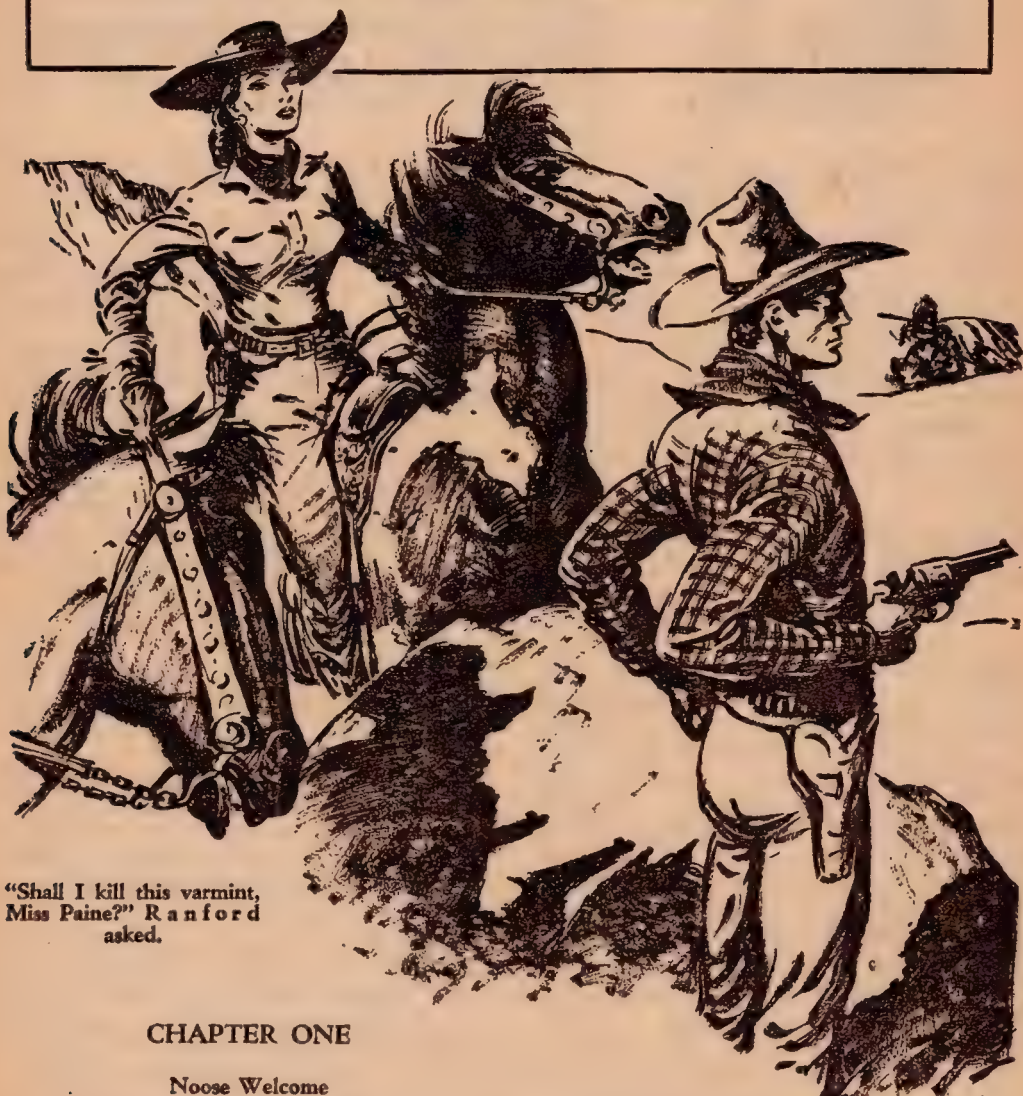
But the men in the saloon were now thoroughly aroused. They didn't much care if someone wanted to shoot the barkeep, but the sight and smell of another month's rations of whiskey gathering in puddles on the puncheon floor was too much.

From three directions, they closed on the furious Kid and his now-worried companion. Gomez, suddenly discreet, left the Kid trapped behind the bar and dove through the front door in a hail of lead. A few minutes later William Bonney dropped his empty guns to the floor and raised his hands above his head.

The clientele of the saloon, thoroughly riled, frog-marched the Kid through the streets to the other side of town and de-

(Continued on page 96)

THE CRIPPLE-K KILLER



"Shall I kill this varmint,
Miss Paine?" Ranford
asked.

CHAPTER ONE

Noose Welcome

A TOO long dry spell had driven Windy McCloud north, and a poker game that didn't turn out right had put him afoot. He looked over the dusty parched street of the town called Dobe and

fingered the last dollar in his pocket. The saloon looked like a cool place, so he headed there.

The red-headed kid down the bar had a surly look about him, but the set of his

By Thomas Thompson

shoulders and the gun at his side seemed able to back any quarrel he had with the world, so Windy gave him space. He sidled up to the end of the bar and ordered whiskey. A solid built, florid-faced man sitting at one of the tables nodded a half-friendly greeting.

Windy had his drink and started to leave. It looked like cow country back there toward the hills. Maybe this neck of the woods hadn't been hit so hard. The man

at the table got up and came toward him.

"You looking for Lance Kirby, stranger?" the stocky man said.

Windy looked the man over for a second before answering. "Can't say that I am," he said finally.

"You look like a waddie down on his luck," the stranger said. "I'm Kirby, and I been advertising for hands. Thought maybe you heard of me."

"Well now I could do with a job," Windy



Windy McCloud had long scoffed at any bewildered waddie who would allow himself to be roped and hog-tied by any she-male. . . . But when Anne Paine threw her twinkling smile at the devil-may-care drifter, he charged head-on into the waiting guns of a deadly bushwhack crew!

admitted, leaning back against the bar.

"Why be so damn cagey, Kirby?" the red-headed kid down the bar said. "What sheriff is this one running from?"

"You happen to be talking about me, kid?" Windy asked evenly.

"Don't see anybody else in here, do you?" the red-head asked.

Windy took the remaining fifty-cent piece from his pocket and carefully stood it on edge on the bar. "Give me another drink, bartender," he said. "I want to give this youngster a chance to tell me more."

"Why don't you try keeping out of trouble, Ranford?" Lance Kirby said impatiently.

"Because I'm fed up with you running hardcases in on this range," the kid called Ranford replied.

The door of the saloon opened and a bewhiskered oldster with a marshal's badge on his vest came in. He walked toward the red-head. They talked together for a minute, then the marshal came over to where Windy was standing.

"You got a job, stranger?" he asked.

"I was talkin' to this gent about one," Windy said.

"He hasn't got a job," the red-headed kid snapped. "He's another gunslick on the dodge. Otherwise what would he be doing here? Kirby made a big show of pretending he didn't know him—"

Windy McCloud pushed the old marshal to one side and made for the kid at the bar. "For a young squirt you shore talk a hell of a lot. Reckon you can back up some of those statements?"

"I can back it up this much," the kid said, shoving himself away from the bar. "You go to work for anybody around here and I'll have my sights set for you. I don't like your looks and I figger I know the cut of your cloth. Now get the hell out of town!"

Windy McCloud measured the kid slowly with his eyes. "I work where I please and for who I please," Windy said evenly. "Figger on tryin' to stop me?"

"If you think I can't, you're crazy," the kid said heatedly.

"Maybe you better start right now," Windy said softly. From the tail of his eye, Windy could see the marshal moving up behind him. The kid at the bar ducked to one side and made a move for his gun. Windy's

fist lashed out and caught the red-head hard on the point of the chin.

From then on Windy couldn't figure for sure what happened, but inside of seconds there were ten or twelve men in the room. Fists were flying and bottles were sailing from the bar. He had the feeling that the man called Lance Kirby was siding him, but the marshal and two other oldsters were taking a different stand. He was doing right well when he saw the marshal's arm go back. Then it felt like the whole place had come down around his head. Vaguely he heard the marshal say, "You may run the range, Kirby, but I still keep the peace here in town!"

THE sun poured hot from the single window and painted an oblong splotch of orange on the dirt floor. Windy McCloud rubbed the knot on his head, rolled over on his bunk, and looked out through the barred door to where the bewhiskered marshal was sitting at his desk. Windy half opened one eye and made another attempt at conversation.

"Would you mind running over all the charges just once more, marshal?" Windy said pleasantly. The marshal didn't make a move.

"Does being a vagrant mean I'm a bum?" Windy insisted.

"You talk too much," the marshal said slowly.

Windy McCloud grinned. Then he stretched luxuriously and yawned. Maybe they wouldn't hang him, he thought comfortingly as he closed his eyes. Maybe they would just let him sleep for a year or two. The thought pleased him.

A single fly buzzing halfheartedly around the cell kept him from sleeping as soundly as he wanted. Once he slapped at the fly with his hat and missed. Once he threw a boot and it struck with a clang against the barred door.

Thoughts tumbled back and forth across Windy's mind as he tried to sleep. This Jim Ranford, for instance. That red-headed son must be somebody, Windy figured. Never in his life had he stirred up so much hell just for poking one man in the nose. Hot-headed devil, this Ranford. Good looking kid, though. Clean-cut. Lot of spunk. Funny how that red-head hated strangers and the other gent seemed to like 'em.

Kirby, his name was. The fly settled down and Windy slept.

When he awakened it was with that stock-still alertness that had become a part of his life down along the Pecos. He was aware of every sound—knew every movement in the narrow jail cell—sensed every shadow—yet not a muscle in his body moved. He continued his heavy breathing, and even an Apache would not have sensed that Windy McCloud was awake. Windy felt the vacant spot around his waist and the empty place on his hip where his gun belt should have been. He kept his ears turned to sounds outside and knew that the town of Dobe was yawning through that indefinite period between deep dusk and a night of hell raising. He heard the muffled snort of a horse, as if a hand had been placed over the animal's nose. Then that rattle at the barred window—the same sound that had awakened him.

Turning slightly he peered through the dimness of the barred door to the office where the marshal sat. The rawhide chair was empty, but the marshal's gun belt hung on a peg by the desk. He heard a hissing at the window. Slowly, Windy raised up on one elbow, at the same time pulling himself out of the shaft of light that trickled half-heartedly through the barred window. The light in the window was blotted out and he could see the head and shoulders of a man.

"Get ready to jump when these bars come out," the man at the window ordered in a muffled whisper.

"What for?" Windy asked lazily.

"Never mind the palaver," the voice said impatiently. "Ranford has a mob down here to talk to you and they got a mighty long rope."

The face disappeared from the window. There was the sound of reins being slapped against the sweaty shoulder of a horse. The bars in the window growled protestingly, then they pulled loose, sending a shower of crumbled adobe into the room. It sounded like man-made thunder.

Windy didn't stop to think. If the man was telling the truth about Ranford and the mob, it was time to leave. If he weren't telling the truth. . . Windy had a funny feeling about jails. When a man was in jail the most logical thing to do was to get out. If the door wasn't open and the win-

dow was. . . Slamming his hat on his head he crossed the room with a bound, clutched the window sill with both hands and vaulted out, his long legs streaming out behind him. He hit the ground outside, rolled once, bunched his legs, and snapped to his feet. There were three men waiting. Windy recognized one as the man Lance Kirby who had taken his side in the brawl this afternoon. Kirby motioned toward a riderless horse and Windy hit the saddle. The startled animal wheeled and streaked down the street toward the edge of town. The three men followed. One man was busy coiling in a rope, from the end of which rattled and bounced three rusty bars.

They took the left fork at the edge of town and Kirby slowed the horses. There was enough moon so that they could see their back trail. After awhile Windy could see the marshal on his clay-bank coming down the road at an easy lope. There were three men with him. He pulled up at the fork in the road, studied the ground for a minute, then took the fork that led to the right. The three riders with Windy laughed. "Good man, the marshal," Lance Kirby chuckled. "Give him two guesses and he's wrong every damn time!"

Windy McCloud pushed his hat back on his head and dug a forefinger into his scalp. "Reckon I should just say thanks and not ask questions," he said, "but after trying to talk to that mummy back there in Dobe's hotel I'm plum starved for the sound of the human voice. Mind if I ask what this is all about?"

Lance Kirby rode over and stuck out his hand. "Not much mystery about it all," he said. "That Jim Ranford you whittled down is ramrod for the Pitchforks over on Dry Creek. He's big across the britches, that one. Sort of tries to run things. Rest of us ain't got much time for him and there was some around here wasn't upset none when we seen you call him. I own the Cripple-K. I'm short of hands and you set a saddle like a man we can use. Enough said?"

"Well, I was having a powerful good sleep," Windy said, "but the air does smell better out here. I guess maybe you better count me in."

Lance Kirby laughed, and the riders giggered their horses into a trot.

CHAPTER TWO

Owlhoot Brand

THE Cripple K ranch was not a place that gave the impression of an outfit that was struggling for existence. Rather it gave the feeling of over-plenty, and the cluster of buildings sitting on the low hill frowned possessively over the flat acres of sage studded range. The corrals and barns were painted, and it was the sort of place a man could dream of, were it not for the feeling of arrogance that permeated the entire spread. Windy glanced approvingly at the remuda of clean limbed cow ponies bunched in one corner of the horse pasture. There was money here. It was hard to believe that the Cripple-K could be troubled by a red-headed kid like Jim Ranford and the little Pitchfork spread Kirby had pointed out in the valley. Lance Kirby cut in on his thoughts.

"Here's your new outfit, cowboy," the Cripple-K boss said. "Turn your horse over to the wrangler there and come on up to the office."

On the long porch of the main house Windy paused again and looked back over the spread. The range ran flat for a good twenty miles, then sloped gradually up through scrub oak foothills to pine covered mountains across the valley. A natural setup, Windy thought. Summer range and winter range crowding each other for room and a good sized stream setting its marker of cottonwoods through the middle. Then as he became oriented he realized that the stream was on the Pitchfork range. He shrugged. So that was it. Water trouble again. An old story.

He entered the house and heard Kirby call. The Cripple-K boss was friendly and expansive. He sprawled behind a desk in a small cluttered office. The morning sun streaking through the window threw a blood-red glow on the boss's naturally florid face.

"The bunk house is over in that clump of cottonwood," Kirby said. "Pick yourself a horse and an outfit from the tack room. The pay is fifty a month and found, and we start on the round up next week. There'll be rep's from six outfits, but you don't have to worry about anyone but the Pitchforks. Unfortunately, there's been

some water trouble in the past. The Pitchfork is a little hard pressed, and that red-headed Ranford has a habit of dabbin' his loop on calves that ain't with Pitchfork cows." Kirby turned in his chair and started thumbing through some papers on his desk. Windy figured the interview was over and started to leave, but Kirby stopped him.

"You pack one gun or two?" Kirby asked.

"I find one is enough to get a man in trouble," Windy said.

"I'll fix you up," Kirby said. "Quite a few coyotes and rattlers on this range."

His meaning seemed obvious, but Windy passed it off. He reached for the door knob and Kirby said, "Been in any better jails than the one in Dobe?"

Windy turned and looked at the Cripple K boss a long time. "Maybe I ain't been in no other jails," Windy said.

Lance Kirby grinned. "I don't ask my men to talk no more than they want to," he said.

What Kirby meant by that remark was clear to Windy when he entered the Cripple-K bunkhouse. Six men sat on their bunks and raised their eyes slowly when Windy entered the room. One spoke. He was a thin man, and a natural swarthinness showed dimly through the pallor of his cheeks. He did not remove the brown paper cigarette from his mouth when he spoke. "That'll be your bunk," he said, jerking his thumb toward a vacant bed.

Windy said, "Thanks." There was no word from the other men, but Windy felt their eyes following him. He went to the indicated bunk and sat down. His heel knocked against something under the bed. Lifting the edge of the quilt he peered under. There was a complete outfit there.

"The man who had this bunk coming back for his gear?" Windy asked.

"He won't be needing gear where he is," the thin man said. "Take what you want. The rest of us are superstitious." The thin man got up and the other men followed. They left the bunkhouse and Windy was alone.

After awhile he walked over to the window and looked out. From here he could see that the men were grouped along the rail of the horse corral. Remembering that Kirby had told him to pick out a mount he

went out and joined them. "Any of these already taken?" he asked the thin man.

"Take your pick."

"Got a rope?"

He was handed a short catch rope.

Windy circled the horses. There was a heavy set blood bay that caught his eye. Windy dabbed him on the first try.

"Looks like a good one," he commented.

There was no answer from the men at the fence.

WINDY led the horse outside and went for a saddle. He found a three-quarter rigged shell with a low cantle and a good hair blanket. There was still no comment when he saddled the bay. He had one foot in the stirrup when the thin man spoke.

"That's my horse and outfit you got there," the man said. "Take off that rig and put the horse back."

"But I thought you said—"

"I said put it back!"

Windy McCloud took his foot from the stirrup and trailed the reins on the ground. Inside him was that slow boiling anger that took so long to come to a head but raised so much hell once it broke. He had a feeling it was about to cut loose now.

"Listen, you hatchet-faced Piute," Windy said evenly. "If you want some trouble you don't have to go to all the work of making me saddle a horse to get it. Take that gun off and I'll be mighty happy to oblige."

The thin man made no move to relieve himself of the gun. Instead, he walked over and cracked Windy across the face with his open hand. "I ramrod this outfit, McCloud," he said. "I want you to know that right off." His hand dropped and came up. The barrel of a .44 prodded deep in Windy's stomach.

Windy made two moves. His right hand caught the foreman in the Adam's apple and his left hand knocked aside the gun. Then his knee came up and sunk into the foreman's groin. As the thin man hit the ground Windy piled him. It was Lance Kirby who finally pulled him free and ordered two men to take the beaten body of the foreman to the bunk house. "I see you can take care of yourself, McCloud," Kirby said.

Windy made no answer. The breath was choking in his throat and the trembling weakness that follows violent rage was sap-

ping his knees. After awhile he turned to the men around him and said, "That blood bay and that riggin' is the outfit I'll use." Then he turned and went to the bunkhouse.

Kirby followed him. The thin faced foreman was there. He had stopped at the pump and washed his face. There were ugly red blotches marking his thin skin. Lance Kirby came straight to the point.

"McCloud's going to work here, Garth, and you two are going to get along. That clear?"

"All right by me as long as he don't trip me up," Windy said.

"Just wanted to see what you was made of," Garth said, but the twist of his lips belied his words.

Kirby left, and the two men were alone. Garth made no attempt at conversation, so Windy let it go at that. After awhile the silence began to gnaw on him and he found himself wishing he had stayed with the seclusion of Dobe's jail and taken his chances.

He walked over to the door and looked out, and there, as if in answer to his wish, was the red-head Jim Ranford and the bewhiskered marshal of Dobe. They were talking to Lance Kirby. The marshal was still chewing and was doing all the listening. Kirby turned and called to Windy.

"The marshal here is looking for you, McCloud," Kirby said. "Says you broke jail."

Windy looked from one to the other and decided to take his chances with the marshal. The set up at the Cripple-K, whatever it was, was not to his liking. "Guess you got me dead to rights, Marshal," he said. He stuck out his hands as if waiting for handcuffs.

"The charge was vagrancy, wasn't it, Marshal?" Kirby said, his voice edgy.

The marshal squirmed. "That's right," he said reluctantly.

"If a man is working he ain't a vagrant, that right?"

"That's right," the marshal said.

"This man's working," Kirby said.

Young Jim Ranford had been sitting his horse quietly, though Windy could see that there was a volcano about to erupt. This challenge of Kirby's set it off.

"You gonna let him get away with that, Marshal?" the red-head demanded. "What the hell more you want? I told you yesterday this McCloud was on the dodge. Why

else would he come to Dobe? Ain't the fact that he came to work for Kirby enough to prove it? Kirby won't hire a man unless he's got a couple of murders to his credit and has proved his hand at shooting a man in the back!"

"That's a lot of talk for a man, 'less'n he intends to back it up," Windy said evenly.

"I'm not afraid of you or any other man of Kirby's long as I'm facing him," Ranford snapped.

"Now wait a minute," the marshal soothed. "We don't want no more trouble—"

"Seems to me Ranford here don't ride this way unless he's bent on trouble," Lance Kirby said. "State what brought you here, Rainford, and get back on your own range before you get more than you bargained for."

"I came to ask you about that pen full of calves down there in the draw at the corner of my place," Ranford said. "I want a straight answer!"

WINDY thought he caught a look of smug triumph on Lance Kirby's face, but the boss's voice betrayed no emotion. "Any law against a man penning up his own calves?" Kirby asked.

"Now Jim," the marshal warned. "I told you those was Cripple-K cows outside that pen."

"Sure they were Cripple-K cows, but when a snake like Kirby pens up calves for no apparent reason that close to the Pitchfork range, he's got something up his sleeve. That herd of his don't grow so fast from natural reasons."

"Wait a minute, youngster," Windy said evenly. "I don't right know what you're talkin' about, and I doubt if you do, but I don't like the way you hang tags on people. I'm tellin' you to put up or shut up, right now!"

"Why you dirty owlhoot skunk—" Jim Ranford's hand darted to his side, but before his gun could clear the holster Windy had him covered.

"I don't like the names you been hangin' on me ever since I hit town, Ranford," Windy said. "As for what Kirby is doin' with his own calves, seems to me that's his business. You get the hell back where you belong before I lose my temper, and the next time you come catawaulin' around

here you better have something^a more definite than a mouthful of words with you. Now git!"

Lance Kirby stood a long time, staring after the departing Ranford. Garth, the foreman, had come up and was standing near. "You should of shot him while you had a chance, boss," Garth said.

"I don't think so," Kirby said knowingly. "There's easier ways of skinning a cat." He turned then to Windy. "You'll do all right, McCloud," he said. "You operate like I do. You've got brains."

He started toward the house and motioned for Windy to follow. Half way there he stopped and said in a low voice, "You catch on quick, McCloud. Now here's what I want you to do. Get over there by that holding pen and guard those calves—but not too good. If I know that hot-headed Ranford he'll be going back for another looksee. He's got more curiosity than a 'coon. By the time he gets back there will be a couple of Pitchfork calves in that pen. I've seen to that. Then if he loses his head and drives off those calves—" Kirby chuckled. "That would be rustling, wouldn't it, McCloud?" He jabbed a heavy thumb into Windy's ribs. "I'm trusting you to handle this. Some of these other hands of mine are too thick between the ears."

Windy had no trouble finding the pole corral down where the corner of the Pitchfork range and the Cripple-K range came together against a natural wall of sheer sandstone. Small pinon pine and scrub oak formed a shaded flat, secluded from the immediate view of anyone riding either line. It was only the bawling of the frantic cows that would lead anyone to the corral. Inside the corral were eight calves, and outside the mother cows ran clumsily back and forth along the fence, bawling their displeasure. Windy made a careful check on the cows. They all distinctly bore the broken K of Lance Kirby. He heard voices and a crashing in the brush to one side. Instinctively he squatted behind a boulder, his hand hovering near his gun.

From out of the scrub oak came two cows with new calves, followed closely by a pair of riders Windy had seen in the bunk house at the Cripple-K. Windy remained behind the rock, watching the play before him.

One of the riders dismounted while the other shook out a rope. The rope whistled

and one calf fell hard, caught by the hind legs. The man on the ground quickly scooped the squirming little animal in his arms and deposited it in the corral. Within seconds the second calf was dealt with in the same manner. Then the riders put spurs to their horses and headed back into the brush. Outside the corral two Pitchfork cows bawled dismally.

Windy shook his head. He could imagine what would happen now if that hot-headed Ranford kid came back to make another check and found the Pitchfork calves.

He thought some of turning the Pitchfork calves loose, but decided that about the only way he could accomplish it would be to turn all the calves out. Then he decided to wait it out. Maybe this Ranford kid could be reasoned with.

CHAPTER THREE

Boomerang Rustler

JIM RANFORD wasted no time in getting back to the corral. It wasn't over half an hour after Windy arrived that he

heard horses and saw the sorrel top of Jim Ranford. Then the wind went out of Windy's lungs with a *whoosh*. Ranford was riding with a girl. And it wasn't an ordinary girl, either. Her hair was black and tied down slick. There was a flat crown hat on her head and it fitted perfectly with the line of her chin and the tilt of her pug nose. There was a serious strained look on her face, but it was a face that could relax into lovely acceptance for the right man.

She rode astride, like a man, and she rode close to Jim Ranford, head cocked slightly to hear what he said. She was paying a lot of attention to Ranford, this girl was, and Windy felt a twinge of jealousy. A man could do a lot of fighting for a girl like that. There were two other riders with Ranford and the girl. They were old men, but they sat their saddles straight and looked salty enough. Windy stepped out in the open to meet the quartet of oncoming riders.

"I'm taking a second look at those calves," Jim Ranford said by way of greeting.

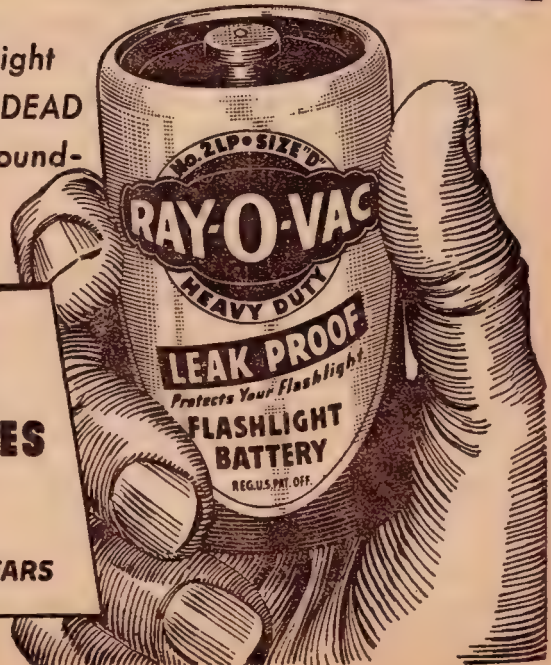
"Sure," Windy said, removing his hat.



Many flashlight
batteries GO DEAD
just lying around—
BUT

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FOR YEARS



"But before you do, I'd like to tell you what jest happened. I'm Windy McCloud, ma'm," he said, stepping closer to the girl.

"I don't care who you are," the girl snapped. "If you ride for the Cripple-K you're a law dodging skunk as far as I'm concerned. Get out of the way!" She raised her riding quirt, and Windy dodged aside.

Ranford had dismounted and was walking over toward the pole corral. He let out a bellow, and Windy knew he had found the Pitchfork cows. "There it is, Anne," he yelled. "There's two of your cows out here."

"That's what I was aimin' to tell yuh," Windy started.

"Shut up!" the girl ordered. She dropped down from her horse, light as an alder leaf in a spring breeze, and ran to where Jim Ranford was standing. She took one look at the cows and then turned to Windy. "You dirty filthy bunch of coyotes," she said. "Here's one time you don't get away with it! Jim, open that gate and drive those calves back over to my place!"

This girl was as stupid as Ranford, Windy thought. Didn't she have sense enough to see that this was exactly what Kirby wanted?

"I wouldn't make a mistake like that if I was you folks," Windy said easily. "You're gettin' yourself in for a heap of trouble. If you drive off them calves Kirby will have a rustlin' charge against you as shore as you're knee high to a grasshopper."

"We're not being scared off by Cripple-K threats," Ranford snapped.

"I was only trying to save you a peck of trouble," Windy said, holding his temper. "I been working for the Cripple-K. I know what's going on—"

"Open that gate," the girl commanded.

Jim Ranford started toward the gate. Windy shook his head. "Guess there's only one way to talk sense to that red-head, ma'm." He reached slowly for his gun.

"I wouldn't if I were you," the girl said. "There's two mighty good shots behind you."

"Yeah," a voice behind him cackled. "And if you think Miss Paine is jest a pull-in' a old trick, turn around and see what my hand is full of."

Windy turned slowly and looked into the cold faded eyes of the two old timers. Each one held a Peacemaker, and it was

easy to tell they knew what the guns were for. "Old Betsy here ain't had meat for breakfast for nigh on to ten year," one of the old timers said. "You make one move and I may have trouble holdin' her in check."

Windy kept his hands free of his sides and watched while Jim Ranford opened the gate. There was a mad scramble of calves coming out and cows going in. Ranford mounted his horse and tried cutting out the two Pitchfork cows. By the time he and the girl had their two cut out the Cripple-K cows were wandering down across the Pitchfork pasture, heading for the river.

"Shall I kill this here varmint, Miss Paine?" one of the oldsters with the gun asked.

"We'll leave that sort of thing to the Cripple-K," the girl said. "All I want is what's mine. Let him go!"

"Shore hate to miss a chance like this," the old man said. He rode over close, reached down from the saddle and lifted Windy's gun free. Sticking the gun in his belt he reined the horse around and followed Jim Ranford and the girl. "First chance I had to kill a skunk for ten years," he complained as he rode away.

LANCE KIRBY chuckled contentedly as Windy told him the story of the calves. When Windy came to the part of the old man relieving him of his gun, Kirby laughed aloud. "You're all right, McCloud," he said. "I couldn't of done better myself. Imagine a slick with a draw like yours letting that old coot take his gun! You're all right."

"What's your next move?" Windy asked, rolling a cigarette.

"Simple," Kirby said, tilting back in his chair. "They drove off my calves, didn't they? I got every legal right in the world to go get my stock, and I aim to do it. Of course, if young Ranford and those two old coots over at the Pitchfork get hurt in the process, it'll be too bad."

"How about this girl?" Windy asked. "Who is she?"

"Anne Paine? She the owner," Kirby said disgustedly. "Stubborn as her old man was, but that spunk won't get her no place if her stock gets scattered far enough. She's got to turn in a good calf crop next week or the Pitchfork will be for sale cheap."

"And you figger on seeing that the stock gets scattered?"

"You catch on quick, McCloud. There'll be a good job here for you when the Cripple-K has that lower range and the water in it. Go on out and ask Garth to give you another gun. We're riding for the Pitchfork, come dark."

Windy hurried out to the bunk house. Lee Garth was sitting by the door, a cigarette drooping from the corner of his mouth. "The fair haired son is back," Garth said to the other men.

Windy ignored the insinuation. "I lost my gun," he said. "The boss says that you give me another one."

"So the fair haired son lost his gun?" Garth taunted. "Maybe this would be a good time for me to convince you I don't like you."

"Maybe," Windy said. "But I think that you better give me the gun."

"Suppose I don't?"

"Then I'll just have to take yours away from you!"

The door opened and Lance Kirby stepped in. "What the hell goes on here?" he bellowed.

"This McCloud is gettin' too big across the britches for my liking," Garth said surlily.

"If you got brains you can afford to be big across the britches," Kirby said. "Give him a gun!"

Garth moved reluctantly toward the corner and came back with a belt and gun. Windy carefully checked the chambers and then belted the gun around his waist. He snaked the gun from its holster a time or two to get the feel, then suddenly pivoted and covered the men in the room with the weapon.

"Just as fast as ever," Kirby said approvingly.

"And I shoot as straight as I draw fast," Windy said. "Line up against that wall!"

Kirby laughed. "What you doing, practicing?"

"Playin' for keeps," Windy snapped. "Line up, face to the wall. I didn't sign up to steal stock from a woman. This is where I get off!"

Kirby let out a bellow of rage and started across the room. The hammer of Windy's gun came back. Kirby took one look, his eyes popping from his red face, then he went to the end of the room and lined up with the others.

One by one, Windy stripped them of their guns. He tossed the weapons through the window, and the crashing glass tinkled loudly in the room made more still by the heavy breathing of the Cripple-K cowboys. When they were all stripped of their guns, Windy stepped back.

"I wouldn't bother riding over to the Pitchfork tonight, if I was you, Kirby," he said. "There'll be a welcoming committee

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Well, the war is over, but millions of men are still in uniform and the monotony lingers on. "Send them Camp Shows" is still a two-fisted appeal—an appeal to put a fist into each pocket and dig deep. Dip deep and send your contribution to your local community fund now for USO and the other National War Fund agencies.

waiting!" He backed out of the room and vaulted into the saddle of the blood bay. The animal lurched at the touch of his spurs and he thundered down the narrow valley toward the river and the flat range of the Pitchfork.

There was a good singing sound in his ears as he rode, and when he first saw the dim lights of the Pitchfork ranch house he caught himself wondering if perhaps Anne Paine wasn't fussing around the stove in the kitchen, a calico apron starched and fresh tied around her tiny waist.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gun Men Only!

THE dogs in the barnyard of the Pitchfork signaled Windy's arrival. He proceeded cautiously from there on, remembering the quickness of Ranford's temper and the tilt of Anne Paine's chin. He was somewhat relieved when he saw the marshal's clay bank standing hip shot near the ranch house door. The marshal so far had kept to the middle of the road. Windy appraised the tumble weed spread and cursed softly. It was easy to see it hadn't been roses for this girl the last year or so. The door of the house opened and Jim Ranford stood framed in the yellow square. He held a rifle. "Who is it?" he called.

"It's McCloud," Windy called back, "and I'm riding with my hands high. I want to talk to you and Miss Paine."

"Talk from where you are, McCloud," Ranford said.

"The Cripple-K's are riding over here tonight," Windy said. "If you need a hand, I'm out of work."

"Get down slow," Ranford said.

Windy dismounted, keeping his hand away from his gun. He saw the face of Anne Paine appear in the doorway alongside Ranford and saw the red-head gently push her aside. Windy had a strange feeling that it would be fun fighting for a girl like that. Then he felt a little guilty. After all, he was quite a bit older—a drifting cowhand wasn't much of a catch for a girl—"Come on in," Ranford's voice broke in, "and keep your hands in plain sight."

Windy walked to the door and entered, Ranford's rifle prodding him along. The marshal sat near the stove, his colt out.

"You better start talking straight, son," the marshal said.

"I didn't ask to hire on at the Cripple-K," Windy said. "I needed a job and I took the first offer. When I saw how the wind was blowing I decided I didn't like it. You folks got a heap of trouble riding your way tonight and I figured I might help."

"We ain't taking help from an owlhoot-er," Ranford said.

"Hold on, now," the marshal said. "We don't know nothing against this boy except that he worked for the Cripple-K. If he quit there that cleans his skirts."

"Not as far as I'm concerned it don't," Ranford snapped.

"Reckon I'm gonna help whether I'm wanted or not," Windy drawled, looking at Anne Paine. He decided there wasn't as much hatred in her eyes as there had been this afternoon and he also decided her eyes were more beautiful this way.

"How do we know this isn't a trap?" she said.

"You only got my word for it," Windy said. "I ain't never lied to a beautiful woman."

"Watch your talk, McCloud," Ranford said, but Windy could see that there was a trace of a smile on Anne Paine's face.

"Do I help?" Windy asked.

"I couldn't trust you," Ranford said. "Marshal, he's wanted for jail breaking. He's your prisoner."

The marshal made an obviously slow move for his gun. Windy dived and knocked it aside. At the same time he came up fast and caught his shoulder under Ranford's rifle. As the gun pushed aside he grabbed Ranford's elbow and twisted it up. Hooking the rifle under his other arm he tore it free. He stood in the middle of the room, the rifle held at his hip.

"I'm getting plum tired of arguing with you folks," Windy said then. "I tell you Kirby's riders are coming tonight, and they aim to wipe you out. If you haven't gumption enough to fight your own battles, I'm going up there in the narrows and do what I can myself. I don't cotton to standing by and seeing a woman get in trouble."

He backed out of the room, the rifle held at ready. He believed he saw a look of frank admiration in Anne Paine's eyes, and it made the task of holding off Kirby's gunhawks seem small.

Outside he mounted the blood bay and rode hard toward the narrow pass that fed from the Cripple K range to the Pitchfork spread. Reaching the pass he turned the horse loose and found himself a place behind a pile of granite high on the south slope. He tested the surrounding ground with his feet to make sure he had footing. Then pumping a shell into the rifle he sat back and waited.

THE Cripple-K riders rode slowly as they entered the draw. Windy waited until they were all well within the narrow passage then he stood up. "You better go back, Kirby," he called. "We got the pass covered."

"You made one double-cross too many, McCloud," Kirby's voice came back. As if to back his statement a bullet whined close and flattened itself against the rock at Windy's side. Windy held his fire. If he cut loose now Kirby would know he was alone, and he wouldn't have a chance.

The Cripple-K riders were old hands at this game, and Kirby handled them like a general placing an army. In a matter of sec-

onds there was not a man visible in the draw there below, but Windy knew that guns were waiting behind each shadowy rock and clump of chaparral. He could plainly hear Lee Garth and Kirby talking.

"He's running a bluff," Windy heard Garth say. "He's up there alone."

"He's too smart for that," Kirby said.

"You gonna let him fool you again?" Garth said disgustedly.

"You're so damn sure, why don't you go smoke him out?" Kirby taunted.

There was a long silence, broken only by the sound of cattle in the valley below. Once Windy heard the distant barking of dogs from the Pitchfork spread. The sound echoed around the low hills and was picked up by a coyote high on the slopes behind him. A horse neighed down in the draw, then there was the sound of footsteps in loose gravel and the metallic click of a gun hammer being cocked.

Windy whirled just in time to see Lee Garth towering over him. He fired point blank, saw Garth spin, then heard him yell, "Come and get him men! He's all alone!"

There was a wild Comanche yell from

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the draw below and guns started blazing. The lead splattered so thick that Windy could not raise his head. Off to one side and on the same level he could hear Lee Garth directing the fire. Once Windy raised to one knee and snapped a shot in Garth's direction, but the hail of lead knocked off his hat and one slug seared a hot streak across his fore-arm.

He could see the men advancing now, coming slowly up the hill, dodging from rock to rock. Once he saw Lance Kirby, waving the men on like a conquering hero. Windy triggered fast, and Lance Kirby laughed loudly. "You're riding your last trail, McCloud," he called.

Windy took time out to reload his six-shooter, then throwing all caution to the wind he stood up and started blazing away at every moving target. He saw two men dive for cover and stop in their tracks. Lance Kirby dropped behind a rock and started pouring a stream of lead into Windy's hiding place. Windy dropped the six-shooter and picked up the rifle. He felt hot lead cut into his body and saw another Cripple-K rider go down.

But they kept moving in, closer and closer. There was blood in Windy's mouth now, and there was a terrible numbness crawling up his left leg. He heard Lee Garth's snarl of victory and turned to see the Cripple K foreman standing close, his gun level.

Windy fired twice, then swung his rifle on the approaching Kirby. Something exploded in his face, and he went down hard. He heard Kirby scream—heard a thunder of shots. Lee Garth was there, crawling toward him. He still had a gun. Windy used the last of his strength to pull the trigger of the rifle. He remembered Lee Garth sprawling out by him as if he were going to sleep. . . .

THERE were a lot of other things that went through Windy's mind. That red-headed Jim Ranford, for instance, standing there crying like a baby and saying what a swell guy this McCloud was. He kept hearing Ranford's apologies. And the marshal's moustache was bouncing up and down, too, but the main thing was the cool white sheets and the angel that put bandages on him.

He guessed it was a long while before

that day when he sat out on the front porch of the Pitchfork and watched the marshal still chewing away on that sizeable cud. He couldn't think of much conversation, so he said, "You still want me for jail breaking?"

"Nope," the marshal said. "You didn't break jail. You was forced out. You ain't no vagrant, neither. You got yourself a job."

"Job?" Windy asked.

"That's right, Windy," a girl's voice said. Windy looked up and there was Anne Paine. She was even more beautiful than Windy had remembered, and his heart started doing a lot of crazy things. Then it all went to pot. That red-headed Jim Ranford came around the corner of the porch and put his arm around Anne right there in front of everybody.

"We want you to stay, Windy," Ranford said. "Anne and I will need a good man like you to help us get this place back on its feet."

The way he said "Anne and I" left no doubt that Jim Ranford had come in and settled and taken over the range. Windy rubbed his homely face and his heart went back down to where it belonged.

"I sure appreciate that," he said then, "but I got to be ridin' along back where I come from. You see, there's a gal back there—"

That was a lie, but they needn't know it. Beside, it seemed to please Anne.

"Fact is," Windy went on, "I was thinking this morning I'm ready to ride now. Want to come along, marshal?"

They rode out together, Windy McCloud and the marshal. Anne Paine and Jim Ranford stood on the porch, arm in arm, waving good-bye. The marshal looked back and a big grin covered his bewhiskered face.

"They sure make a handsome couple," he observed.

"Never was much of a hand for the women," Windy said. "Cramp a man's style too much."

The marshal nodded sympathetically. "Know what you mean," he said. "Still though, it'll be a good thing for Jim there. Boy's got a lot of good in him once he gets his feet on the ground."

"Don't it beat all how a woman can twist a man around her finger?" said Windy McCloud.

THE END



Clegg dropped to his knees and his .44 answered back.

COLD STEEL FOR HELL'S BACKYARD

By Willard Luce

Coon City's rough-and-tumble citizens were secretly betting that Clegg McCann wouldn't live long enough to supply steel spikes for the strange railroad that ended in the midst of nowhere. . . . But the frontier steelmaster was just foolhardy enough to pit his wits and guns against the most dreaded renegades ever to sew terror and death along that untamed country.

EUGENE STEGGAL took the cigar from his mouth and blew a quick jet of smoke into the room. The lamb chop whiskers made his face look even heavier. "I won't try to kid you, McCann. It's a tough job that I'm offering. Somehow Walt Bass has blocked every attempt I've made to get these spikes and plates in from the outside. And I know that he'll try and block you, too. He's one hombre you can't turn your back on."

Clegg McCann listened with a patient indifference. He lifted the costly Havana

to his mouth and tossed his red head back. "How many spikes and how many plates, Gene?"

"Figure it out for yourself." While Steggal spoke his shrewd eyes searched Clegg McCann's face and failed to catch the glimmer of excitement he had hoped for, and was disappointed. "Forty miles of track, two thousand seven hundred ties to the mile, two plates and four spikes to every tie. Figure it out for yourself."

He watched McCann's mental calculations and spoke into them. "That's better

than making horseshoe nails. It's even better than plowshares or picks or wheelbarrows. You can make those anytime. This is now—or never."

"But you once said I couldn't make a spike that'd hold a plank sidewalk together, let alone a railroad." Clegg McCann watched the big man from under his heavy brows, greatly enjoying the feeling of power this moment gave him and the strong discomfort it gave Eugene Steggal.

The big man swore softly. "A man says a lot of things, Clegg. But I've sunk a fortune into this road. And by God, Clegg I'll finish it if I have to do it with wooden spikes!"

Clegg smiled. "All right, Gene, I'll have them ready for you the first day of September." He stood up and stretched.

"You're a lifesaver, McCann! If you need any money—if you need any men—if you need anything at all just ask for it." Eugene Steggal sat down hard sighing with relief.

Clegg McCann reached for his hat and left. He stood for some time on the porch, savoring the last of the cigar.

BELOW him the grade of Steggal's railroad climbed into the hills. As crazy a dream as man ever conjured up! A forty mile stretch of rails in the middle of nowhere; only forty miles of railroad! At one end was Clegg's furnaces, and at the other the river port of Coon City.

But behind that dream was the shrewd brain of Eugene Steggal who could see many things that other men could not. Clegg McCann could see some of them, perhaps not all. That's why he had accepted the job.

Across the opposite hillside stood McCann's blast furnace. Along the forty mile stretch of the railroad Steggal was building was the iron ore, the coal, and the limestone to make the pure iron. With the railroad McCann wouldn't have to worry about creating huge stock piles or closing for the winter. Eugene Steggal had promised all year service at fair prices.

McCann tasted the last of the cigar and flipped the butt regretfully into the dust, wondering if perhaps he shouldn't come to see Steggal more often. Then he moved from the porch and through the town to the blast furnace across the river.

In the yard were a dozen wagons of ore, and idle teamsters. Clegg McCann passed them and found Walt Bass seated on the wall chatting with the blower. As McCann came up, the blower went back to the furnace.

Walt Bass had been a skinner all his life. He knew both the ways of animals and men. He shifted the bullwhip coiled around his shoulders and said, "You stopped to see Steggal." He was a heavy man as Eugene Steggal, but padded with muscles where Steggal had been padded with fat. His hair was long and a dirty gray color like his mustache. He squinted one eye as he talked.

Clegg nodded, and the freighter said, "Then I guess we won't unload!" He stood up and McCann caught his arm.

"The hell you won't. That's my ore and you're under contract."

Bass jerked loose. "Contract hell!" He reached for his bullwhip, stepping backwards as the whip came off his shoulder. Then suddenly he stopped with his arm bent back. Slowly his arm came down to his side. His right eye squinted a little and his tongue ran over his lips as he watched the derringer in Clegg McCann's hand.

"You ever touch me with that bullwhip, Bass, and it'll be the last living thing you ever do." The smelter owner told him, his voice still soft. "Now unload the wagons."

Walt Bass' eye almost closed as he weighed his chances. Finally he turned with a shrug and ordered his teamsters to unload.

Carlisle Kraemer, the furnace blower, stood beside McCann and watched them. He spoke slowly, "It's too bad it had to come so soon. If I were a betting man, I'd lay my money against you this time, Clegg." He looked at his boss with an open frankness.

Clegg McCann's blue eyes sparkled strangely behind the dead seriousness of his face. "Just how much would you bet, Carl? A month's pay?"

"No. Make it two months." Kraemer spat tobacco juice into the dust. "You've looked at the coal, have you, Clegg? We pull the coke ovens tonight, and there's enough to fill them once more. Walt Bass's a smart man. He's brought ore and he's brought limestone; but he ain't brought a

load of coal in a month. There's your ace, Clegg. The spikes and the plates were Steggal's ace. Coal is yours." The blower spat again into the dust. "Maybe you'd like to make it half a month's pay instead?"

But Clegg McCann shook his head. "No, Carl, I've got an ace too, a black one."

"Then you better play it right." Carlisle Kraemer swung around and moved towards the blast furnace, yelling out to the men that it was time to cast.

Walt Bass' wagons rolled out of the yard, churning the dust beneath their wheels.

McCann turned towards the three coke ovens sitting like as many bee hives on the brow of the hill. The pot was open now and he had no time to lose. Eugene Steggal had sent for him a week before, but he hadn't gone. Instead he had waited for Walt Bass to make this final delivery, knowing the moment he stepped into Steggal's house Walt Bass and all the rest of Irontown would know.

AT FIRST, when Clegg McCann had offered to furnish the spikes and plates for Steggal, the big man had laughed. "Your iron might be all right for picks and shovels, Clegg, but not for railroads. It's much too weak and light." But as time went on, Steggal and everyone else in Cedar Valley knew it would be Clegg McCann's iron or nothing. Walt Bass had known it all along and had played his cards well.

Twice the orders Eugene Steggal had sent for spikes and fish plates were simply lost. Once the order was canceled by a telegram signed *Eugene Steggal* and sent from Pine Crossing, but Steggal hadn't been in Pine Crossing in three years. Once they were shipped and a tracer found they had been delivered to the Northern Pacific in Montana. Yes, Walt Bass' arms were long.

Stop Clegg McCann now, and all the profit of hauling the locomotive, the cars, and the rails across the desert would belong to Bass along with an ever-greater strangle hold on the freighting business of the valley.

Clegg reached the hill and called to the men by the ovens, "Double the guard tonight, Joe!"

Dirty and grimy, the little man waved at him. "All right Boss."

For two hours he moved about the plant and the yard, checking and double check-

ing. As soon as he had heard from Steggal, machinery had been set up to make the spikes and the plates, and now the first of them would be run off before nightfall. That is, if nothing happened.

Then an hour before sundown, ten huge wagons of coal rolled into the yard. Kraemer and McCann stood together while the drivers dumped the loads. "That's my ace, Kraemer. Those men are farmers who just moved onto Cottonwood Flat. They need money and they need iron and they don't mind bucking Walt Bass in order to get some. But the important thing is that they got through before something happened to the road."

Clegg McCann knew he had to make good now! This was his one chance to make a going concern of the furnace. Without it the furnace would probably have gone under. It had been expensive to build, the iron expensive to make. Last winter's shut-down because of lack of materials hadn't helped. He needed a big job like this to pull him out of debt and give him a running start.

McCANN didn't go home that night but moved restlessly about the plant. He caught every sound, every movement, everything that was strange or different. And he weighed, it and sampled it for its meaning, feeling the increase of pressure as the night rolled on and the little things mounted.

So he wasn't entirely caught by surprise when the gunfire lashed out at him from the corner of the yard. He dropped to his knees and his .44 answered back. Then he leaped sideways, hearing the cries of the wounded man in his ears.

He leaped again and still again before he heard the stumbling of a running man in the darkness. He drew a bead on the shadowy figure. The earth jerked beneath him. On the brow of the hill the sky ripped apart. McCann twisted to see the coke ovens and the fire and the half changed coal blasted into a million pieces.

Debris hailed about him, then Clegg McCann was on his feet racing for the coke ovens. When he got there, there was only the ruins and three dying men.

He had them attended to and then yelled out to his coke oven men. "Go home. Go home, all of you, and get some sleep. Be back here in the morning at six."

Clegg then stumbled down the darkened hillside towards his shack at the edge of town.

At six the next morning his men were there. At seven they were scraping the edges of a deep gully half a mile from the furnace. At eight wagons came down the hills loaded high with logs.

The bottom of the gully was covered thick with small wood and the logs were piled, lapping each other, until they almost reached the top of the gully. Then they were covered over with sod except for the hole in the center of the top. The wood was set on fire.

Carlisle Kraemer watched it all and when they set the fire, he said softly, "Drive the gasses from coal with heat and you've got coke. Drive them from wood and you've got charcoal. Either one will make iron." It was as though he was meditating to himself. Then he looked at the furnace owner in a strange way that made McCann both suspicious and angry.

"You're too damn interested in your bet, Carl. Get back to the furnace or you won't have any wages to lose."

The blower studied Clegg McCann with a tolerant indifference, then turned and went slowly down the hill. McCann watched him go, the suspicion within him growing stronger. Kraemer was too interested in what was going on. He had been at the coke ovens last night when he should have been home in bed. He had been here today when he should have been on the furnace.

"Joel!"

The coke oven boss came up, dirty and grimy as ever and with the smile that never seemed to leave his face. He stood before McCann without speaking and waited his orders.

"Double the guards tonight—no, triple them, by hell. Get rifles, and shoot anyone you catch prowling around. Anyone, you understand?"

The little man nodded. "Sure, boss."

DAY after day they made other piles of logs in the gullies, and day after day Clegg McCann moved restlessly from one part of his grounds to another. Always he reminded himself, "Watch the little things. Bass always picks on the little things, the key things. What'd gum up the works? What would shut us down?"

He watched the clay and the sand for the runners. He watched the water, the drills, the ladles—everything. Time went past and suddenly Clegg McCann realized that they were too far ahead. The little things, the key things, couldn't stop them now.

It would have to be something big—something damn big!

More restless than ever, he now paced the grounds. Watching the hoist, the furnace, everything big enough to kill the work. Doubling the guards, and doubling them again until there were as many guards as workmen.

Then one night the keeper didn't come to work. And before midnight the first helper and the cinder snapper were rolling over a barrel screaming at the pains in their bellies. McCann sent them to town to the doctor.

He went out to bring in some of the guards to help on the wall. But the guards weren't there, not a one of them. The yard was dark and silent. A half a mile to the north and west he could see the faint glow of the charcoal pits. He didn't go there, sensing that it would be the same. One of the men had brought a jug of wine onto the job and they had all had their drink before McCann had found it.

Shaking his red head savagely he turned back to the furnace. He came onto the wall and said to Carlisle Kraemer. "We're all alone, Carl."

The blower's face was rugged and hard in the glow from the melted slag. He nodded briefly as he reamed out the hole in the furnace to make the slag run faster. "Get her ready," was all he said.

Later they plugged up the slag hole and drilled into the furnace at a lower level. Melted iron and the remaining slag gushed out through this new opening. After that it was hell. They had to get the molten mass through the skimmer; the slag down the slag runners, the iron down the iron runners. They had to watch the ladles, punch out the dams at the right time. Force the stiffening slag on with a long, green willow pole. Fight the heat and the sweat and the sulphur fumes.

Two men doing the work of five.

Then above the other sounds, McCann heard Kraemer calling his name. He looked up and saw the blower rushing towards him

through the smoke as if he had gone mad.

As he looked something snapped around his neck and tightened, jerking him backwards. His fingers clawed at the braided bands. He fought against them, but his back was to the slag run and he had to give or be pulled down into the melted slag. He stepped over the slag run and the bull whip jerked, dragging him to the edge of the wall. McCann strained against the whip. The heat of the slag ladle below him came hot against his back.

Then the whip jerked and his foot slipped and he went over the edge, only a strangled scream coming from his smothered throat.

Vaguely he saw the shadow of Carlisle Kraemer's body coming at him from the side. He felt the pressure of the blower's shoulder strike him in mid air, deflecting him from his downward course and causing him to crash against the ladle's edge. He thudded against the wagon wheel on which the ladle was mounted. Then he hit the ground.

It was almost dark here, the glow from the slag giving only a faint mysterious light to the surroundings. Clegg McCann lay there fighting for breath and only faintly aware of the men rushing in at them. Dimly he heard one man keep saying, "No noise, damn it! no noise."

Carlisle Kraemer was on his feet lashing out at them. Some how McCann got the bull whip loose from his neck. He rolled over and tried to come up. Someone jumped in the middle of his back, flattening his face to the ground. And after that—darkness. . . .

A HARD darkness that was disturbing and unreal. A darkness that slowly dissolved with the feeling of motion. He was being carried, carried up a stairway. As they came to the top McCann could see the iron and the slag still running. Close by the wall he could see the ladles glowing. Ahead of him, two men carried Carlisle Kraemer. It was towards these glowing ladles that they were moving. Clegg McCann suddenly realized Walt Bass' intentions.

It was Walt Bass; Clegg McCann knew that. No other man in Cedar Valley could use a bullwhip like he could and it had been Walt Bass' voice that had called, "No noise!"

The two men ahead were passing over the slag runner, only feet from the ladle now. Clegg McCann reached up and his hand closed over the .38 on the hip of the man who was carrying his head. He didn't drag it out, but tipped the muzzle inward and pulled the trigger. The man screamed and his leg gave way.

Clegg twisted as he went down and kicked out, sending the back man bouncing down the stone stairway. Clegg pulling the gun from the front man's holster.

"What the hell, Steve—" Then Walt Bass and his helper saw how it was, and dropped Kraemer to the floor. They jerked out their guns and came towards McCann in a rush.

McCann had the .38 in his hand. He squeezed the trigger and dropped the lead man with one shot. As he beaded on Walt Bass he felt a shot strike him in the back and knew Steve was again at the top of the stairs.

He twisted over and smelled the pungent smell of lead burning across the stone floor where he had just been. He shot and by the answering flash, took careful aim and fired once more. After that there was only he and Walt Bass to fight it out.

He could hear the pounding beat of the freighter's boots on the stones. Rolling over, he felt lead smash him again; this time in the shoulder. The first shot he had hardly felt. This one struck like a sledge hammer, bringing with it pain and burn and nausea. His stomach retched.

He tried to lift the .38 and knew his shoulder was broken. Walt Bass was close. Clegg rolled again, catching the pistol in his left hand. As he came over, the freighter's gun exploded almost in his face. Then Clegg took his last shot and Bass sank slowly to the floor, sighing deeply.

A WEEK later Clegg lay on his bed, pulling at another Havana and enjoying its sweetness. He studied the three hundred dollars in his hand and shook his head, puzzlement showing on his face. "I don't get it."

Eugene Steggal and Carlisle Kraemer chuckled softly. "I bet you two month's pay, Clegg—and lost," the blower told him not the least bit unhappy about the whole thing. Perhaps because Eugene Steggal had paid the money and not him.

McCann asked, "Then why does Gene pay it?"

At this both men laughed. Then Steggal looked at Kraemer and the latter frowned and pulled a five from his pocket and passed it to the railroad man, looking doleful at the loss. "Let's go back to the first," Steggal suggested. "I knew that Walt Bass wouldn't give up his freighting business without a fight. I offered to buy him out and he wouldn't sell. Then I offered him the job of freighting my stuff across the desert. He took it, but I knew he would hold up something for a joker. Walt Bass loved money so I figured it would be the plates and the spikes he would leave because there would be less money in hauling them than anything else. That's also why I claimed your iron was no good. If Bass had thought I could get the spikes and plates from you, he would have left something else behind." Eugene Steggal hooked his thumbs in his vest and blew clouds of smoke into the air, a man well pleased with himself.

"But that still doesn't—"

"No that still doesn't explain the five spot. Well, you see, Clegg, Kraemer's my

man. If you hadn't got the mill in shape for the contract, he would have. After I gave you the contract, he had two jobs. One was to help guard the mill and the other was to get you mad. Yes, to get you mad." The railroad man gently pushed McCann back on his pillow. "Mad enough to beat even Walt Bass. And by damn he did it, too!" Eugene Steggal's laugh was big for the room. "You know the saying, Clegg—a mad Irishman'll whip his weight in tornadoes."

"But that still—"

"Oh, yes, the five. I bet Kraemer five dollars you wouldn't catch on to what it was all about." At that Steggal laughed again. This time Carlisle Kraemer joined, sufficiently consoled now for the loss of his five spot. "Like I've always said, the country's filling up. Five years from now the main line'll come through Cedar Valley." Steggal blew clouds of white smoke. "See where the Steggal Short Line'll be then. People have to have railroads. They—"

"And iron," Clegg McCann reminded him.

"Yes, and iron, Clegg."



WITH LANCE AND ARROW



FAVORITE Indian weapons for hunting buffalo were bow and arrow and lance. Killing the big beasts on foot with such primitive weapons was hazardous in the extreme and made the hunt plenty spicy. It was not till the Spaniards introduced the horse to America that the odds were changed in man's favor. The Indians bought or stole these horses and henceforth hunted from horseback, though still employing lance and arrow.

In this the Spaniards emulated them. Although they possessed crude firearms, the *conquistadores* never used these on the buffalo. Perhaps scarcity of lead and powder accounted for this, or perhaps it was a matter of sporting spirit. Subsequent events support the latter view. In any case, the *ciboleros* (buffalo hunters) adopted the weapons of the Indians.

For over three centuries they killed buffalo in that fashion. Each fall the young *hidalgos* with their *peones* and friendly Indians rode out of the settlements for from six weeks to three months to supply the larders with meat and the stores with suet and robes. Creaking *carretas* lumbered in their wake, driven by men who could skin and butcher as fast as the hunters could kill. The meat was cut into strips and hung up to dry. This they called *charqui*, from which springs the American "jerky." Tons of it was shipped south into Mexico, along with the tanned hides.

This hunt was never work—it was always more of a fiesta. Only, the ladies were not present. It was a bit too rugged for them. This was a man's game and a man's fun.

Special ponies were bred for the occasion. Queen Isabella sent from Spain the *palomillos* we now call pintos and the Texans "paints." Quick, spirited, highly-trained, they were as intelligent as polo ponies. But the game was not as tame as polo. It was far more rugged to pierce a buffalo bull with a lance than hitting a ball. These Spaniards were real men. They played with their lives, not with a ball. And they had fun. They never took to exterminating the buffalo for the sake of making money out of the brutal butchery.

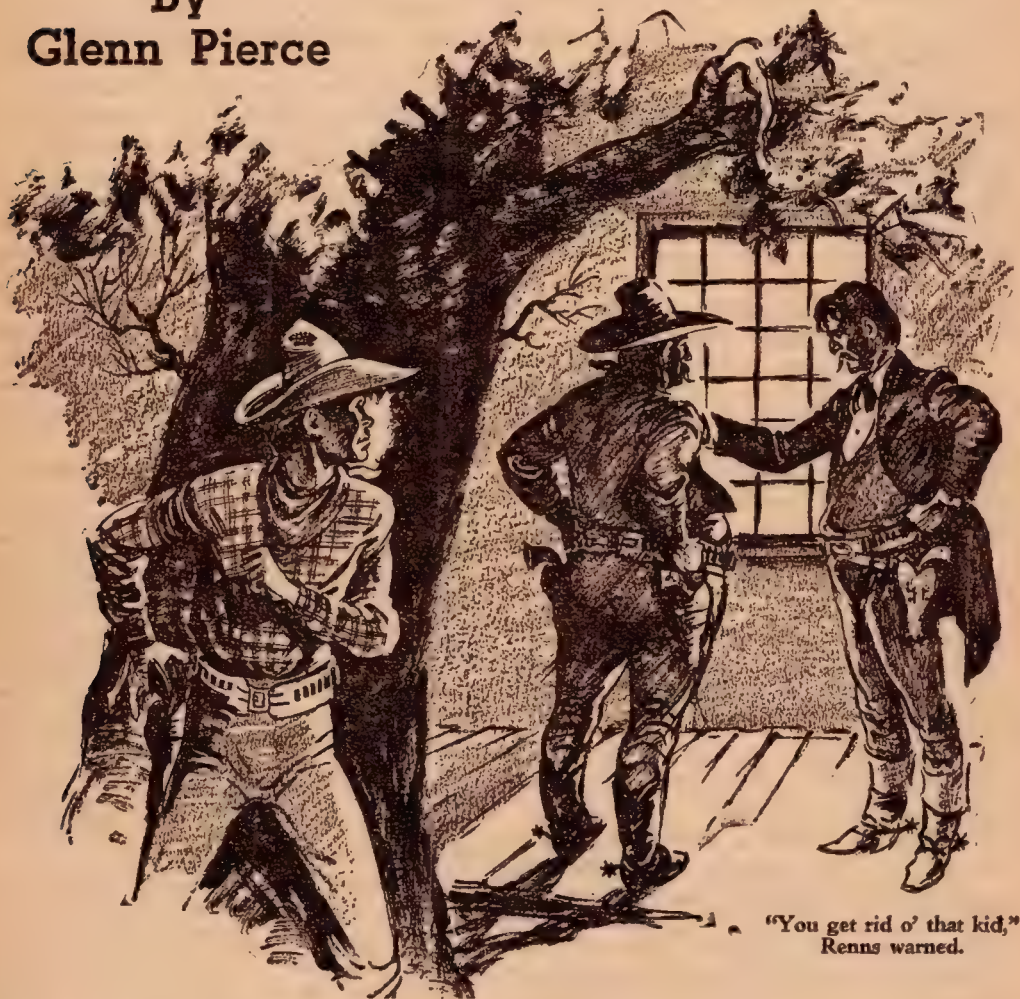
The *ciboleros* never hunted with the long rifle. As late as the eighties they still hunted in the ancient sporting fashion, till the buffalo gave out. All honor to these frontier hunters for remaining sportsmen to the end!

—ROY VANDERGoot.

SATAN'S STEPSON

The Poke made a pitiful figure astride the flea-bitten roan. He couldn't have been more than fifteen. . . . But his eyes were those of a gun-wise oldster with one last chore to finish.

By
Glenn Pierce



"You get rid o' that kid,"
Renns warned.

HIS name wasn't "Poke" until Big Ack saw him, but once he had been christened, the name stuck.

Big Ack was slouching on the sagging upper rail of the corral fence, his brush-scarred boots hooked under the second rail, finishing his plug of Buckeye as the orange sun climbed down behind the San Miguels. He was a big, round, sloppy man, but his little gray eyes were sharp and shrewd.

He glimpsed a slight figure in battered

Levis approaching on a rawboned paint through the gathering dusk. A bulging saddle-pack dropped on the paint, and both the boy and his horse were floury with trail dust.

Big Ack grinned through his bristles. "Hi, Poke," he said. "Ain't you kinda off your road?"

The boy came closer, and Big Ack could see that Poke was a good name for him. He was thin and stooped and freckled, and

wisps of sandy hair stuck out beneath the sweat-stained brim of his Stetson. His lips were thin and pale, and didn't look as if they were used to smiling.

"Ain't this here the Angle R c'ral?" the youngster asked in a reedy, apologetic voice.

"Yep. Was you plannin' to bed down amongst the hosses?"

The Poke did not smile. "I was figgerin' on a job. You—you the owner?"

Big Ack lumbered off the rail and peered at him. "No, I ain't Luke Renns," he said. He paused thoughtfully. Then—"But it so happens Luke needs a couple more hands. Can you ride an' rope?"

"Yep."

"You look kinda small."

"I'm tough, though. I'll last."

Big Ack chuckled. "I guess you will, at that." He rubbed his bristly chin, considered for a moment. It was almost as if he were trying to think of a good reason for doing as the youngster wished. Then—surprisingly—"C'mon in the bunkhouse an' meet the fellers."

"You—you mean I got a job?" The boy seemed aghast.

"If you want same after you meet this bunch o' crazy people in the bunkhouse."

Poke dismounted eagerly, saw to his horse, and followed the foreman to the little shaken cabin.

Behind them a big man froze in the shadows of the cottonwood clump, but neither of them saw him.

Inside the cabin a red-faced, white-mustached old cowpoke was chattering volubly to an amused bunch of lounging waddies, who grinned and played cards as if they were used to him. The room was low ceilinged and smoky, and the youngster felt his eyes water as the mixture of tobacco and lamp oil and woodsmoke drifted up his nostrils. There was a shaky table, with four poker players. Two other cowpokes relaxed on narrow bunks.

BIG ACK glared amiably at the white-haired old man, who moved slyly about with the briskness of a sparrow.

"Hesh up, Flannemouth," Big Ack rumbled. "Here's somebody new you can tell them tall stories to." He pulled the boy into the greasy yellow fan of light. "What's your name, kid?"

A trace of humor showed in the youngsters eyes. "They call me Poke," he said.

Big Ack gaped, then burst into a roar of laughter, his fat sides shaking. "Independent little cuss, ain't you?" But his eyes were friendly.

Flannemouth wobbled to the boy's side, stared curiously—not at him, but at Big Ack. "You mean this kid's workin' for the Angle R?" he demanded incredulously.

"Why not?" Big Ack's jaw jutted.

"Nothin'," Flannemouth shrugged. "Only Luke—"

There was an interruption. "Ack!" A big, square, dark man stood in the doorway, his thick black brows scowling flat across his forehead. He wore a black coat and a string tie, and the coat bulged at the side where a gun hung low. The yellow lamplight threw his bony features into sharp relief. This must be Luke Renns, the Poke thought. "Come here, Ack!" the man growled. "I want to talk to you."

The Poke saw Big Ack's grin suddenly harden. But he obeyed the summons. Floorboards squeaked as he moved heavily to the door. "Sure, Luke. What's up?"

The two disappeared into the gloom outside, and as they did so, Flannemouth raised a warped hand for silence. "Listen!" he ordered. "Everybody keep still!"

A cowboy laughed. "You're the one does all the talkin', you ol' jaybird!" They grinned and kept on playing as Flannemouth drew the boy with him to the cracked window. Separated from the others, the two stood out of the light, and listened to the men in the gloom outside.

The Poke peered cautiously through the window. Luke Renns had Big Ack by the shirt-front, and he was mad. "Listen, you damn utter fool!" Renns rasped. "What you mean—hirin' people I don't know! You're gettin' almighty big for your britches. I was listenin'—from the trees—when you did it. Now you go in there an' tell that kid to get out—quick!"

Big Ack made a sudden movement. There was a thud—knuckles against jawbone, and Renns flopped in the dirt. Flannemouth gulped cheerfully at the Poke's side. Renns sat there for a moment, and the Poke reckoned he was more surprised than hurt.

"Now, listen!" Big Ack's voice had lost all its cheerfulness. "I'm through comin' when you whistle! For some reason I like

that kid. I liked him when I first seen him. Mebbe I like him better because you don't. He stays!" Big Ack stood there, his fat, powerful arms hanging monkeylike from his stooped shoulders, a little in front of him as if he were ready for anything Renns might do.

Renns slowly got to his feet, wiping his bleeding mouth with the back of his hand. But he stood out of arm's reach. "Ack," he said poisonously, "I'm tired of you. I'm goin' to talk—"

Big Ack chuckled, and his little eyes squinted without mirth. "No, you ain't, Luke," he said. "I've done your dirty work for you right enough. And I'd dangle if you yapped. But what I'd have to tell the jury wouldn't help your peace of mind none. I ain't afraid of you, Luke."

The two bristled a moment longer. Then Big Ack turned on his heel and stamped toward the bunkhouse.

Flannemouth gripped the Poke's arm and yanked him toward a battered chair. "Make out like you heard nothin'," he warned. "That'll show you. You got to watch out!" The other waddies continued to lounge and play cards as if a scrap between foreman and boss was an everyday occurrence.

Flannemouth hoped the Poke was a good actor—and he was. He acted as if such stuff happened all the time where he drifted from.

Big Ack came in and slouched there with his hands on his fat hips. "Poke," he said quietly, "you'll be all right here. If you're careful."

"I'll be careful," said the Poke. But he didn't sound as if he meant it. And as he looked at Flannemouth, the gabby little white-haired puncher, teetering innocently on his heels near the window, the Poke knew that he had at least one friend, even if he *weren't* careful.

THE Poke made himself so useful around the Angle R that even Luke Renns could find no fault. He never kicked when the jobs were tough, and he was so cheerful about going to Echo Creek—nine miles away—to spot mavericks that Big Ack had to watch closely to see that the other hands didn't take advantage of him.

And the Poke could handle a gun. He had a little .38 that he used to sniff leaf buds

off cottonwood branches at fifty paces. He'd fire five shots, then reload, even though he carried a six-shooter. Always five. It seemed as if he were saving that slug in the sixth chamber for a special purpose. Big Ack watched him and laughed, but Luke Renns never laughed when he saw this shooting.

The Poke also discovered that in McIver, the little dusty town that centered Echo Valley, hands from the Angle R weren't welcome. Many a Saturday he paced down the main street with Flannemouth jabbering at his elbow, only to have other ranchers and the townsfolk cross the street when they approached.

He asked Flannemouth about this, but the little, white-mustached puncher, for one time in his noisy life, refused to talk. "They jest don't like Luke," he explained feebly. "Luke's got too much money to have many friends."

The Poke began to suspect that maybe Luke Renns was adding to his herd by judicious selection of his neighbor's stock, but he could never catch him at it. So far as he could see, Renns was a prosperous, honest rancher whose bad temper had gotten him cordially disliked by his neighbors. And he saw that Renns liked people about as much as they liked him.

One day, when they were roping in the remuda, the Poke asked Flannemouth another question. It seemed a poor time to ask it, because Renns was close by, and he overheard.

"Flannemouth, did you ever hear of a rancher named W. L. Davis?" the Poke asked in his apologetic way.

Flannemouth saw Renns and looked uncomfortable. "Why, yes, son," he said weakly. "Bill Davis owned this here very ranch afore Luke took over. But that was some years ago."

"What happened to him?"

"Why—why, I dunno, son," the old man said, uneasily rolling his eyes at Renns, who by this time was scowling ferociously. "He—he jest disappeared somewheres. Ranchin' someplace else, I reckon. Why do you ask?"

"When my daddy died, he told me to come to the Angle R in Echo Valley and ask W. L. Davis for a job. He said Davis would give me one. I was mighty surprised to find out Davis didn't own the ranch no more."

"Uh," Flannelmouth grunted. "Reckon I better go water my hoss. He's in a lather." He kneed his bronc away from the Poke and disappeared rapidly, his watery eyes turning fearfully toward Renns.

THAT night Renns and Big Ack had another talk on the veranda, and this time there was a shadow in the cottonwoods that they did not see.

"That kid's nosy," Renns growled broodingly. "And he knows who to talk to. I should have fixed Flannelmouth long ago. His jabberin's goin' to get us into trouble. I don't like that kid—never have."

"The Poke stays," said Big Ack calmly. He hitched up his drooping, baggy pants belligerently. "And you keep away from Flannelmouth, Luke."

Renns eyed him speculatively. "You couldn't by any chance," he grated, "know somethin' I already suspect?"

"What you mean?"

Renns V'd a smoke paper, filled it with tobacco, and sealed it with his tongue. "Listen," he said. "You remember how Bill Davis looked?"

"Why not? It wasn't so long ago."

"He was thin and freckled, and he had a screechy voice just like this kid. Do you get it?"

Big Ack regarded him calmly. "What are you drivin' at? Bill Davis wasn't married."

"The hell he wasn't. I found that out before we started this job. He didn't live with his wife. She was back in Kansas City or someplace. But he liked her, even though they couldn't git along together."

"How do you know that?"

"I read his will, didn't I? Before I burned it," Renns chuckled. "And I remember something about it that puzzled me at the time. Davis left all of his property to his wife and her heirs." Renns sucked on his smoke until it glowed red, then puffed angrily through his nostrils. "It set me thinkin', and I watched for a good long time, partic'larly after news of the transfer got out. But nobody ever showed up—until now."

Big Ack was contemptuous. "You're seein' things, Luke. This Poke ain't no Kansas City kid. He can shoot the clinkers off a dead man's eyes, and he can bulldog a steer quicker'n me. He's jest a drifter."

"Well, where's he from?"

"He mentions Arizona every onct in a while," Big Ack said.

Renns jabbed Big Ack's fat chest with a hard forefingers. "You get rid o' that kid," he ordered menacingly. "And tell Flannelmouth to keep his mouth shut, or I'll shut it for him!"

Big Ack considered. He seemed to be thinking hard. And when he finally spoke, the firmness of conviction was gone from his voice. "Mebbe you're right," he said finally.

They went into the house, and the shadow in the cottonwoods snaked carefully back toward the bunkhouse.

THE Poke spent an uneasy night, and early in the morning saddled his paint and cantered off toward McIver before Big Ack could spot him. He was still thin and ready and apologetic, but there was a hard glint in his sun-narrowed blue eyes.

He wanted to do some talking before he got fired.

He sat around in the biggest saloon and watched humbly from a corner, and from time to time his thin fingers played with his sagging cartridge belt. His shells were all bright and new save one—the shell in the loop nearest his gun. This one was battered and green with age. The Poke touched it, and when he did, his narrow jaw stiffened, and his blue eyes grew icy cold.

Along about ten o'clock the swinging doors batted open, and Flannelmouth burst in. The little old man crouched on the threshold, peering at the noisy occupants of the saloon. The sun under the batwings made shadow-parentheses of his crooked old legs. Then his eyes settled on the Poke, waiting quietly in his corner, and he waddled hastily over.

He scraped a chair to the Poke's table without invitation. The Poke saw that the old man's red face was even redder, the veins in his cheeks a scarlet network. "Listen, kid," Flannelmouth said. "Big Ack's lookin' for you, an' so's Luke. You're goin' to be fired."

"I know it," said the Poke calmly. He had taken his thin hands away from his gun, and they lay quietly on the table before him. "I heard Luke and Big Ack talkin' last night."

"Then what are you doin' here! You

ain't quit yet. Your duffel's still in the bunkhouse. I looked."

The Poke shook his head. "No. I ain't quit. I figured I wanted to talk to whoever came to fire me."

Flannelmouth stared at him, and suddenly his old eyes grew bright and kind. "Poke," he said in a low voice, "I like you. I didn't want you to git tied up with the Angle R in the fust place. It's no place for a kid—partic'larly for one I like." Flannelmouth looked around to make sure nobody was listening. "The Angle R," he continued, "is a tough outfit. Mebbe you've noticed?"

"I had my suspicions," said the Poke. "But I haven't seen no crooked stuff."

"Luke's been blamed careful to make sure you didn't see it," the old man said. There seemed to be a hidden message in his gaze. "He's askeered of you, Poke—the fust time in his life he's been askeered of anyone." He rubbed his thick mustache and leaned forward over the table. "Bill Davis was dead when Luke an' Big Ack took over. And he didn't die natural. Luke's usin' the Angle R for his headquarters. No hidin' out on the owlhoot for him. He lives respectable, and he ranches respectable, and he keeps his jobs at a safe distance, so's Echo Valley can't git no proof for its suspicions. He sat back, and his voice grew gentle. "I knew Bill Davis' son. Mebbe I ain't quite so tough as the rest o' these hombres. So I came to warn you."

The Poke's mouth trembled slightly at mention of that name. But his tone was firm and hostile. "Warn me that I'm goin' to be fired?"

"Nope. I had a suspicion you knew that, or you wouldn't have lit out this mornin'. I came to warn you to have Big Ack fire you rather than Luke Renns." Flannelmouth grabbed his hat and stood up.

"Why?" asked the Poke. "Why should Big Ack fire me?"

"Cuz Big Ack likes you, too, son. Ack ain't a bad sort. He's made his mistakes, but so've I, fur that matter." He turned hurriedly. "Now I got to go. I'm riskin' my skin as it is, talkin' to you like this. Likely I'm missed already. Remember what I said. Let Big Ack do the firin'." He clapped his sombrero on his bristly white thatch, and pegged out nervously. The batwing doors swung shut behind him.

A galloping horse thundered by the saloon, its hoofbeats rattling the windows. And as the doors stopped swinging, a stentorian voice shouted, "Flannelmouth! Turn around! Take it in the brisket, you ol' crow!"

A gun boomed.

The Poke kicked over his chair and raced out on the street in time to see a huge, slick black carry its unknown rider around the corner. His thin fingers leaped to his scarred gun-butt. But it was too late, and his hand came away. He ran toward the crumpled heap in the center of the street.

The old man lay hunched, pressing his gnarled hands to his chest. His white hair mixed in the dust, and there was dust on his face. He smiled painfully as the Poke bent over him.

"Ever'body told me my waggin' tongue would git me in trouble," he muttered. His voice was hoarse and weak. "An' it did. But I'm glad it did. 'Specially if I could help Bill Davis' son by waggin' it." He frowned with an effort. "I never liked that killin' son. I never had nothin' to do with it, an' I told 'em not to. . . ." His wizened voice suddenly trailed off.

A crowd was running toward them. The Poke bent closer, whispered frantically, "Flannelmouth! Quick! Tell me—who killed my dad?"

The old man opened his glazing eyes. He shook his head slightly. Blood appeared in a light froth on his lips. "Why, don't you know—" he asked dully. "Remember—Big Ack. . . ."

The Poke stood up and faced the crowd. "He's dead," he announced briefly. "Who done it?"

Nobody seemed to know, but everybody wanted to talk about it. The Poke turned away and mounted his horse.

But before he started for the Angle R, he broke his six-shooter, extracted one of the shiny shells, and inserted the old green one from the end loop in his cartridge belt.

THE Poke looked different when he pulled up in the yard of the Angle R. He sat straighter, and his thin face was hard and strained. He gripped the reins with elbows close to his sides, in the open-handed, relaxed readiness of the seasoned gun-slinger. The chamber of his scarred gun was adjusted so that the corroded shell

was in direct position for the very next shot.

For four years Sammy Davis had carried that shell. For four years he'd practiced until the old six-shooter felt like one of his own fingers, and he could throw it around with an ease and carelessness that belied his deadly accuracy. For four years he'd asked questions, planned and schemed.

But Luke Renns had played his cards well, and there were no legal loopholes in his title to the Angle R. Finally, giving up the idea of ever getting back the ranch, the Poke had decided on vengeance. He had adopted this plan of posing as a drifter and working on the ranch that should be his, in order to find out who had fired the .45 slug that had killed his dad.

He found Big Ack alone in the bunkhouse, cleaning his saddle. The big foreman grinned as he entered. "Hi, Poke," he greeted him. Then his smile died, and he looked puzzled.

For this Poke was different from the kid he knew. This youngster didn't look so young, and lost his punniness. For the first time Big Ack perceived wiry muscles stretched taut over the slender frame, caught the steely glitter in cold blue eyes that had hitherto flicked in apology. For the first time Big Ack noticed that the Poke's leather gun case was tied to his thigh—the mark of a man who doesn't want leather flapping when he pulls iron in a hurry.

The Poke closed the door behind him and pressed his back against it.

"What's wrong, Poke?" Big Ack demanded. He did not move. He saw the killer's light in the Poke's blue eyes. "Where you been keepin' yourself? I been lookin' for you."

"You ain't the only one," said the Poke in a tight voice. "Flannelmouth was lookin' fore me, too. Only he found me. He's dead."

"Dead!" Big Ack dropped the word like a lump of lead. Sudden anger flared on his coarse face.

"Before he died," the Poke went on relentlessly, "he told me who killed Bill Davis."

"Then you are his kid!" Big Ack failed to look surprised. "I kind of thought you was from the start. But I didn't want Luke to find out."

"Flannelmouth told me—the name of the

man I've been trailin' for these last four years."

Big Ack tried to relax the tension. He straightened, shrugged his huge, bearlike shoulders. But he kept his hands away from his sides. "You got off on a blind trail there, son. Flannelmouth didn't kill Bill Davis."

"I know that. But he told me who did."

"And in spite o' that—you drilled him?"

Anger returned to Big Ack's eyes, and he moved suddenly. You murderin' little —"

Even as the Poke went into the smooth, oily motion he had practiced so long, he knew that Big Ack had liked Flannelmouth. And in that brief instant before guns roared and lead slammed into the flimsy wooden walls, the Poke wondered dimly if he were wrong.

The Poke had scrooged down into a gunman's crouch even as he fired from the hip. Big Ack stood rocklike, with feet wide apart. His bullet went over the Poke's left shoulder, but the Poke's corroded shell—the shell that had belonged to Bill Davis' gun—pierced flesh before it splintered the wall.

The Poke swore at himself mentally for being a soft-hearted fool. For even at the last moment, he had swung the thirty-eight's muzzle a fraction of an inch, and the slug that was meant for the killer's heart instead shattered his gun hand.

"Don't move!" the Poke warned. "I didn't shoot Flannelmouth. And I guess you didn't, either." His lips hardened. "But you're still goin' to get it—for killin' my dad."

Big Ack had no time to answer. The door swung suddenly open, and the Poke backed pantherlike to the side wall. Luke Renns stood there, his dark face snarling.

"What's this?" he demanded. Then he saw the crouching boy. "Put that gun away, kid!" He strode within, turning his back confidently on the boy. He confronted Big Ack disgustedly. "You idiot! Lettin' a kid cripple your gun hand! Listen! Flannelmouth gabbed once too often. I caught him where I thought I'd find him—with the kid in town. I saw both their brons in front of Gus's place, and I waited until he came out. Anyway, too much has been said. It's time we lit out. Get your stuff."

Big Ack still crouched, clutching his

streaming fingers. "And the kid?" he asked.

"Oh—" Luke Renns winked. "We'll take him along. He's workin' for us, ain't he?" But the Poke knew that the moment he lowered his gun, Renns' murder-iron would be out and spitting.

The rancher turned, but Big Ack stopped him with a question. "You—you're sure you got Flannelmouth, Luke?"

Renns glowered over his shoulder. "Sure." His heavy lips spread in a wicked grin. "I don't make mistakes. . . ." He jumped suddenly.

With his left hand, Big Ack dove for his forty-five gleaming dully on the floor. Luke Renns bent his knees as he yanked back his coat front to bare his gerased holster. Three guns roared and two of them hit their mark. With two slugs crashing their way through his chest, Renns gaped stupidly, sank gently to his knees, swayed, and thudded face down on the worn boards of the bunk-house floor.

Over their smoking irons, the Poke and Big Ack stared at each other—waiting.

The Poke nodded toward the sprawled black form. "Luke—killed my dad?"

Big Ack holstered his gun deliberately and tore off his neck-cloth to bind up his streaming hand. "He's the feller who believed in direct action, son. I've picked up a piece of dirty change here an' there, but I

don't go to killin' fer my money." The foreman sounded thoughtful. "Flannelmouth and I tried to hightail it two, three times, but Luke had too much on us that would interest a sheriff." He sighed cavernously. "When I fust seen you, Poke, I knew you was Bill Davis' kid. And I wanted you to stay fer more reasons than one."

Running feet sounded. The other hands were approaching. Big Ack looked uncomfortable. "I can weed out the crew," he offered, and his voice was friendly. "And mebbe help you straighten out the title to this place. That is," he added searchingly, "if you want my help. If you don't, I better light out."

The Poke gazed straight into Big Ack's eyes, and he saw something there that told him that Big Ack would serve him more loyally than he had ever served Luke Renns. He took a deep breath and felt his thin body expand. He felt bigger than he had for years. His only regret was that the bullet which had helped bring Renns down was not the old green one from Bill Davis' gun. But that was a small thing. . . .

The Poke suddenly grinned at Big Ack. "You don't reckon your reformin' zeal might cool off after a little?" he asked.

Big Ack shook his head and grinned back. "Not while you're on the prod with that tied-down holster, Poke," he said.



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DARE-DEVIL ACES



CHAPTER ONE

A Pair of Black Guns

RANCE CLAIBORNE was not an eavesdropper by habit, but any man standing at the same bar with the pair who were talking a few paces away from him couldn't help overhearing their conversation.

He saw another small man peer at him with suddenly popping eyes, then turn and hurry out through the batwings into Tucson's brassy sunshine. The man had undoubtedly recognized him, Rance reflected, and some bravo might soon come swaggering in to test his gunswift against the almost legendary black Colts that rode Claiborne's thighs, but that was a worry he would face when it came. Right now he was more interested in the talk of the pair standing near him.

They were comparing the wicked greatness of Tombstone with a new boom camp called Silverdoro that had come to life in the foothills of the Whetstones.

"I'll agree with yuh," said one, "that Tombstone was rough and tough and wild. Thirty million in bullion they clawed out of the Lucky Cuss, the Graveyard, and the rest of their mines, but hell that ain't a going to be a drop in the bucket to what Silverdoro will produce, given a little time and a good fust-class cleanin' up job by a quick-shootin' lawman."

The other man laughed. "How you goin' to clean up a town where they tree the marshal the fust day he's appointed to office, and shoot every deputy the sheriff can hire to go over there? The fust man he sent in lasted jest twenty-four hours, then got his ticket to Boothill. The second did a little better. He lived most a week, by hidin', I hear, in his own jail. Then Nugget Jim



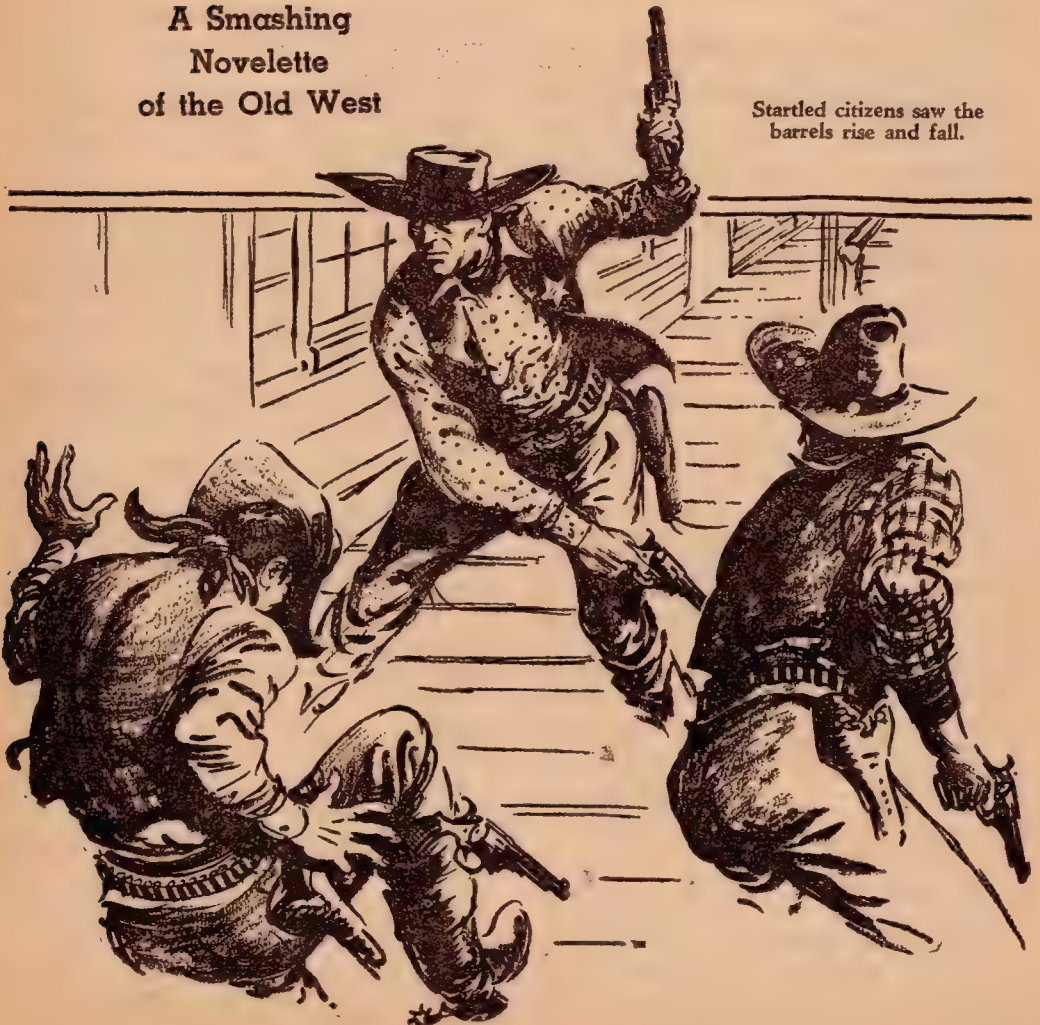
By
**M. Howard
Lane**

THE TOWN THEY COULDN'T TAME

Would you risk your life to save the very man who threatened to make your future a lonely, embittered hell . . . ? Deputy Rance Claiborne had the strength and courage to seek the answer in the heart of a bloody rebellion that strewed dead men's bones from one end of that devil's town to the other!

A Smashing
Novelette
of the Old West

Startled citizens saw the
barrels rise and fall.



Farraday ordered him got, and he was got. Farraday's kingpin of Silverdoro, and he ain't goin' to let any badge toter give him orders. Folks walk light around Nugget Jim and as long as he's bossin' the show you ain't goin' to have no law but his own. Worst of it is that with him rulin' the roost, folks are leery about puttin' their dinero into Silverdoro mining stock. I've heerd there's some mighty funny goin's on over there, and its a danged shame. Wyatt Earp cleaned up Tombstone and they need the same kind of gent to walk into Silverdoro. But the way it stacks up now Charlie Kline can't find airy man to wear a badge into that Whetstone hell-hole. Not even for five hundred a month and a cut on the taxes he collects!"

Rance picked up the small glass at his elbow, and he noticed with some irony that his long, tapering fingers were steady as the chunks of blue ore coming from Silverdoro mine shafts. He sipped the whiskey slowly, set it down, and turned with a characteristic smoothness.

"Your pardon," he said in his soft, well-modulated voice, "but I overheard some of your conversation. Does this Nugget Jim Farraday you mentioned operate a saloon in Silverdoro?"

The men looked toward him, seeing a tall, lean-flanked stranger in dusty, well-cut range clothes. His hat was wide-brimmed, flat-crowned, slanted above a pair of blue-gray eyes that could be twinkly as a summer's sky, or chilly as gray storm scud. Clean-shaven, this stranger's mouth was wide and firm above a square chin. He looked thirty and could be twenty or forty just as easily. Wind and sun had dyed his skin an ageless mahogany hue. There was something about this tall, lean stranger that a man might instinctively fear, yet like at the same time for his was the smooth handsomeness of a mountain puma, grace and lethal destructiveness all molded into one.

"Why, yeah," one of the men answered a little hesitantly. "Saloon and dance-hall. The Dorado, he calls it."

Claiborne tucked his chin in a brief nod. A pulse had started to hammer in his throat. "Tell me," he asked the question, and wondered if his voice was steady, "does Farraday have an entertainer, a girl who sings and plays her own accompaniment on the piano? One called the Silver Belle?"

The smaller of the two men sighed, and lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "That he does," the man said piously. "And it is her, I swear, who has attracted more men to Silverdoro than all the ore in the hills!"

Rance drew a slow breath into his chest, and picked up his glass. He was nearing the end of a long quest, and the old eagerness was alive in his blood. The end of a trail and the start of a new one for that was the way it had always been since that day five years ago when he'd listened to the Silver Belle in roaring Dodge many miles along his back-trail.

"My thanks," he murmured. "Will you have a horn with me?"

THE men nodded, and one said tentatively, "It sounds like you know The Silver Belle, stranger?"

Claiborne shrugged, and the movement seemed to ripple the length of him. "Yes," he agreed softly. "As well as the next man—"

"There ain't airy a man who knows her very well unless its Nugget Jim," the smaller of the pair grunted, "and sometimes I misdoubt if even he could tell you her real name. But I dunno as it matters. She's beautiful enough to give ye chills and and fever, and her singin' and playin' will choke you right up. I've seen men set and bawl right in their beer after hearin' her—"

The batwings snapped inward on squalling hinges, and Rance moved around. Elbows still hooked over the bar, his long hands were tipped down toward the black Colts resting lightly in their open black holsters. The little man he'd watched race out was re-entering the saloon, blinking the sunlight from his eyes. He wasn't, Rance noticed, even packing a gun.

"Air you—air you," he stammered a little hesitantly, "a feller known as Rance Claiborne?"

Rance looked down from his six foot height, and tucked his chin again in that slight, austere nod. "That's right," he admitted, and out of the corner of his eye he saw the pair he'd been questioning go slack-jawed with surprise. They, too, had evidently heard his name before. A lawman, he thought bleakly, who'd been lucky enough to bring order to a few cowtowns and railroad camps gained a reputation even time wouldn't blunt.

"Sh—Sheriff Charlie Kline sends his compliments, and he'd like mighty well for you to join him down tuh his office," the little newcomer stammered. "Says he's honin' to shake your hand and buy you a drink!"

Rance smiled, and tiny wrinkles gathered at the corners of his eyes. "Now that's right nice of the sheriff," he drawled. "Funny thing, but I was just fixin' to go down and have a mite of talk with him. Will you walk with me, sir?"

The little man's chest swelled. Rance Claiborne was just as fine an hombre as he'd always heard folks claim. Chain lightning and thunder with those black guns, but nice and polite and friendly-like the rest of the time. This would be an experience he could talk about for the next six months. But, he thought a little vaguely, it would sure be a shame if a nice young fellow like Claiborne should go to Silverdoro just to get himself shot. And that was what the sheriff was going to ask him to do. A man could guess that all right. Funny though, Claiborne had said he'd been about to go and pay the sheriff a visit. The little man wondered why.

And as they strolled toward the lawman's office, Rance spent a little time asking himself the same question. He'd stepped off the stage that afternoon to lay over until morning when the west-bound Wells Fargo would pick him up and carry him to Yuma and California beyond. In that Pacific state he had figured folks might know little about a U.P. town-tamer and cattle camp marshal. He could settle down and shuck his guns and maybe buy a little ranch. It was a dream he cherished, and he'd saved his town-taming pay to make it possible, and sometimes, mostly at night just before sleep called him, Rance had imagined their parlor with the Silver Belle seated at the grand piano he'd buy her.

He remembered their first meeting as plain as the night it had occurred. In silvery brocade that sheathed her slender body like a case of white light, the Belle had sat at the piano along Nugget Jim Farraday's dance floor, and her voice had struck into him like an arrow. Husky and low, for him alone it seemed. He'd worked close to the piano and her brown eyes had smiled at him, and at the gold badge on his vest. He'd tired to get acquainted in a diffident way,

and then he'd gone on a long hunt to chase down a pair of killers, and when he'd got back to Dodge, Nugget Jim had closed his saloon, claiming Dodge was getting too civilized. He'd followed the Texas herds, blazing a trail to Montana and Wyoming, carrying a big tent and all his gear in a wagon train that stretched for half a mile.

And like a moth attracted to flame, Rance Claiborne had ridden north after the Silver Belle. Across a pair of states and into a dozen different towns he'd trailed them, and there was usually a deputy's badge or a marshal's star waiting for him. And during that time he'd made some headway, Rance guessed, looking backward. Leastways in Cheyenne, he'd got up the courage to tell the Silver Belle he loved her, and he'd asked her to become his wife. But she'd refused him with something almost like tears in her eyes. And right after that a funny thing had happened. Overnight, Nugget Jim Farraday had sold out, lock, stock, and barrel.

In the dawn, he and the Silver Belle had hopped an east bound train while a tired deputy sheriff caught some sleep. That had been more than two years ago, and Rance had told himself grimly that time healed all wounds and made a man forget. But he'd learned that time didn't do anything of the kind. It only made a man remember the smile in a girl's eyes and the curve on her lips, and the way she'd toss her head.

Now he'd stumbled on their trail after two years. Two years that had evidently wrought a heap of changes in Nugget Jim Farraday. In those bygone camps, his saloons had always served the finest liquor, ran the straightest games, and caused a town-tamer the least trouble. But now, if the talk was correct, Nugget Jim had jumped to the opposite extreme. It didn't sum up quite right. He was saying as much to Charlie Kline ten minutes later.

CHAPTER TWO

The Silver Belle Again

THE grizzled sheriff was seated behind his littered flat-top desk in the hot, cubby-hole office that flanked the jail block. Jepperson, the little man who'd brought him here, had been sent on another errand so they could talk privately.

Bluff old lawman that he was, Sheriff Kline had come straight to the point. "Claiborne, I need a deputy who ain't 'fraid of God nor the Devil to take over the Silverdoro district. I'll guarantee five hundred a month, and your cut on the taxes' will boost the ante near to a thousand—"

"If they can be collected," Rance said dryly.

The sheriff shrugged. "There's no use telling you that it will be easy. You've handled such chores before. It'll be simple enough, though, for a man who gains the confidence of the people living in the area. And the way to go about that is to break the hold Nugget Jim Farraday has got on Silverdoro. Him and his henchmen are running the town. He's got a skinny gambler man, name of Spider Grew, who handles the dirty chores for him. That includes collectin' tribute from every last business in the town, and from mine owners to boot. On top of that, his crook dealers and braked wheels are suckin' up the muckers pay like a sponge takin' in water. He's got Silverdoro buffaloed, Claiborne, and I ain't had a man to send there yet that's been smart enough to buck him. You'll be doin' Arizona a service if ye'll take over the chore of whittlin' Farraday down to size. Common folks like you and me, have put their dollars in Silverdoro stock, but it won't pay off long as Farraday runs the town. He makes everybody ante a percentage of their profits so natcherly shafts ain't bein' pushed overly fast, and business houses ain't buyin' more than jest necessities. He—"

Seated across from the lawman, Rance raised his right hand lazily. "Save your selling talk, Kline," he said quietly. "I was sold before you sent Jepperson to see me. I'm honin' to find out why Farraday has changed. Back in Dodge, and a half dozen other places I can name, he ran the cleanest saloons in town. Leopards don't change their spots."

"This'n has," Charlie Kline grunted. "You'll see when you hit Silverdoro!"

There wasn't much sleep for Rance Claiborne that night. He rolled and tossed in his stuffy little hotel room, asking himself if the Silver Belle had changed like Nugget Jim Farraday. But it was a question he couldn't answer, and there was another one that had never left his mind since he'd first

met the girl. Even when he'd proposed to her that time in Cheyenne she had steadfastly refused to let him call her by any name save Silver. Why had she hidden her identity all these years?

"This time," Rance promised himself in the dark, "I'll get the answer to a lot of things, or never make California."

For now that he was on her track again, Rance knew that he couldn't leave Arizona without the girl. She was a fever in his blood—the thing that brought hope to the future.

Finally, he slept, but his eyes were red-rimmed and weary when the clerk woke him in the dawn. "Ye'll have to hurry, sir," the old night man warned. "Horsewhip Dan Cummings don't tarry a minute for anybody when stagetime comes."

An hour later, shaved and dressed and with a good breakfast under his belt, Rance paused beside the tall Concord and looked at the driver already on the box. "Mind if I ride on top with you, oldtimer?" he asked, with his engaging smile. "Fresh air might blow some of the cobwebs out of my head."

Horsewhip Dan Cummings glanced at his passenger, turned his head deliberately and spat tobacco juice to windward, then looked back at Claiborne as though to be sure he was seeing right. "What's that thing on your chest?" he demanded, stabbing a gnarled finger at the glittering gold star Rance had pinned to the pocket of his dark blue shirt. It showed whenever his leather vest swung wide.

Rance grinned. He had always liked peppery old ribbon-poppers, and more than once he'd found them full of valuable information. "Why that," he said pleasantly, "is a little present Charlie Kline handed me. Seems I needed a job and he needed a deputy, so we got together."

"Wear that thing into Silverdoro, and ye'll come apart in a hurry. Climb up if ye want, but take my advice and pin that law badge to your undershirt!"

Rance lifted himself over the wheel, and the stager admired the sheer economy of all his movements. He liked the looks of those black guns, too, and began to have some hope of getting a dividend from the Silverdoro stock he'd bought, if he could talk the young fellow into putting that badge out of sight for awhile.

"Spider Grew's gunnies," Horsewhip Dan tried again as he slung his whip and released the brake, "will use that star for a target the fust second they sight it."

"I thought Farraday was the big auger," Rance said encouragingly as they racketed toward the outskirts of town.

"He is," Horsewhip Dan grunted. "Grew just does his dirty work. He's got spotters at every mine watchin' the take. Gunnies roam the street, gettin' a line on how many customers go into different stores. I tell you its some organization, and they're cleanin' up a scad. If anybody howls at shellin' out, his store is likely to end up with broken winders, busted counters, or wuss. A feller ain't safe at night with a poke in his pocket. Everybody knows Farraday is the town-boss, and that his games are crooked, but they fill the Dorado just the same to hear that gal who calls herself the Silver Belle. Purty as a new mint dollar she is, and there ain't a man in all Silverdoro with the crust to lay a hand on her. Nugget Jim would kick the life out of airy hombre who tried, I'll lay you that. There's some," he rambled on, "who claim she's his wife. T'other say they're jist goin' to marry—"

RANCE felt himself turning icy. He'd asked for gossip and gotten it. Lord! He could feel his brain spinning, and a part of his mind was telling him that he was acting like a fool school kid. But another section was feeling the full force of a blow he'd never counted on receiving. If the Silver Belle was Farraday's wife it would explain a lot of things. Her refusal to marry him in Cheyenne, her denying him the right to know her name. Naturally Nugget Jim wouldn't want anybody learning that his wife was entertaining in one of his own honkytonks. And stopping right on that thought, Claiborne clutched at it like a drowning man reaching for a chunk of driftwood. Nugget Jim might have changed his spots. He might be the ruthless town-boss people named him, but he was too proud a man to have his wife working in the Dorado or any other saloon.

They were out on the desert now, crossing the desolate reaches of the Santa Rita valley, heading toward the misty blue bulk of the Whetstones far ahead. The white dust smoked up behind the lurching Con-

cord, and Rance thought it was murky as his life had been. Ahead, the rutted ribbon of the road lay clean and empty in the morning light. It promised a bright future, once the gunsmoke cleared away.

"If it does!" Rance muttered.

"You say somethin'?" Horsewhip Dan asked eagerly.

"No," Rance shook his head.

"Don't blame ye for lookin' a little down in the mouth," the stager went on. "Ye're tacklin' a tough proposition and I sure wouldn't be doin' it with my badge in plain view."

Rance Claiborne's face had changed. He seemed older now, and his eyes were cold slits between half-closed lids. "When I have to hide my star, I'll turn it in!" he said flatly.

And something in the way he spoke those words made Horsewhip Dan shiver a little. Why, dammit, this new deputy of Charlie Kline's looked like he didn't care whether he lived or died. That kind were like Roman candles climbing the sky. They were mighty pretty while they lasted.

The noon meal was served in an adobe way station, and by mid-afternoon they were in the foothills of the barren Whetstones. The road twisted and climbed, and the horses turned black with sweat.

Horsewhip Dan chewed tobacco and grunted. "We'll hit town around sunset, and ye'll find her a lalapaloza, even with Farraday runnin' it. He's smart. He lets folks make enough money to hold 'em there. No use killin' the goose that lays the golden aigs."

That was going to be his job, Rance thought bleakly, even if Nugget Jim Farraday was the husband of the Silver Belle.

The stage climbed up and up, then levelled into a long, sparsely forested canyon, and Rance got his first glimpse of Silverdoro a mile or more ahead of them. The town was raw and new with one single street running through it. Frame shanties and a few solid adobe structures lined the street, with cabins and tents climbing the sidewalls of the canyon. And at the farther end of town, he could see the gaunt shape of shaft houses where iron buckets lifted wealth from the depths of the earth. The growling rumble of stamp mills was like the savage chant of some unsatisfied giant. It was a sound that would be in every in-

habitant's ears night and day as long as the ore stayed rich enough to mine.

The owners would prosper, but so might investors all over the West. His duty was to them, Rance thought grimly. It was the lawman's creed. The strong had to fight so that decent men and women could live honorably.

Horsewhip Dan leaped to his feet as they reached the head of the street, and his blacksnake popped like a string of firecrackers above the ears of his fast-moving bronc team.

The horses broke into a gallop, and the stager grinned. "Gotta put on a show for the folks," he drawled. "They expect it. Makes 'em forget their troubles for a spell. Stage depot is yonder," he gestured with his whip, "and ye'll find the Dorado down the block. Yore jailhouse is on beyond at the t'other end of the street. Likely have to sweep the cobwebs off'n your desk. It ain't had a tenant for goin' on a month."

Horsewhip Dan careened the Concord into the stage yard, set the brakes to screeching and drew up with a fine flourish. "Son," he said soberly, "I'll wish ye luck. You'll need it. Take that badge now—Whoa!" he added, and his eyes had turned toward the loading platform in front of the office door, which was opening. A woman stood there for a moment. A tall, slender girl in dark green riding habit. Her hair framed her shapely face like a golden crown.

Horsewhip Dan said under his breath, "The Silver Belle—" He glanced toward his companion and blinked. Silverdoro's new deputy had forgotten his existence. The young fellow was looking at the girl and she was looking right back. Their eyes were locked, and they seemed to be speaking wordlessly. Saying things no stove-up old ribbon-popper should hear.

Rance climbed down from the box, and it seemed to him that his feet were hardly touching the ground. The Silver Belle was descending the steps toward him. Her face looked strained, tense, and Rance thought she was going to pass him without any sign of recognition.

But her lips moved a little as she drew near. "Get out of town, Rance. A rider from Tucson brought word you were coming here, and Spider Grew has got a gun-trap waiting up the street. . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

First Blood

HE WATCHED her pass on tall, queenly, and he knew without bothering to turn that Farraday gunnies were posted to watch over the girl, and report any strange actions on her part. She was nothing but a prisoner here in Silverdoro. Why?

"I'll find that out, too," Rance thought, and his spirits were lifting like bubbles in a champagne glass. He laughed to himself. Just seeing Silver made him feel good again. But there was more to it than that. She had cared enough to linger here at the stage station and warn him.

He signaled a whiskery old timer who was hanging around the platform and gestured at the telescope bag Horsewhip Dan was dragging from the boot along with the luggage of other passengers.

"Take that long one down to the jail, amigo," he said, and handed the man a shining silver dollar.

The movement disturbed his vest, and he watched the oldster's watery eyes widen as the star flashed. He stammered, "You're sure that's where you want to go?"

"I am," Rance's smile broadened, "and I hope I get there—"

He walked from the yard to Bonanza Street, and turned left, strolling with the same serene calm Silver had exhibited. Shadows were reaching out from falsefronts to darken the deep ruts of the thoroughfare. Horses and buckboards lined hitchrails, and the tramp of feet along crude boardwalks rivaled the incessant thunder of stamp mills near the mines. Passersby eyed him covertly, and Claiborne sensed that the word of his coming had spread to more ears than Farraday's.

Silver had said there was a gun-trap waiting for him. It might be set in any of the narrow alleys between the buildings he was passing. The dusk was pooling thickly in them, but he guessed grimly that even a town-boss of Farraday's character wouldn't risk the wrath of public opinion by having him shot down without giving him a show of self-defense.

The Dorado was only fifty feet in front now, the biggest false-front structure along the street. A piano jangled inside and dancing feet stamped even at this early hour. Smoke drifted out through the slats

of the batwings like incense, and as he drew steadily closer, Claiborne watched the doors open. Two burly men in rough miners clothes came out together. They staggered tipsily down the steps to street level, and Rance thought, "Here it comes!"

The pair turned toward him, blocking the sidewalk, and Rance notice the guns riding their hips were tied-hard, Texas style. His smile as he moved steadily closer to them was dry, a little tired. Here was a new town, but this was an old game. The pair would close in on him as he came closer, one holding his attention and picking a fight while the other side-stepped and made his draw. Caught in their crossfire he would be as dead as Farraday wanted him to be unless he spiked their play before it started.

The lazy movements of his body were deceptive. One of the pair started grinning as his eyes passed over Claiborne's well-cut clothes, and small neck-cloth banding his throat.

"Why, Pod," he said loudly to his companion, "this feller ain't nothin' but a danged dude. What's Charlie Kline a-tryin' to do? Insult Silverdoro? Feller, them boots of your'n are shiny enough to dance in. Why don't you start—?" His hand was dipping toward his Colt when the lightning struck.

Rance did not appear to move fast, but a long black Colt was suddenly in each hand, and two steps carried him in front of the pair. Startled citizens saw the barrels rise and fall, heard the solid crack of metal contacting bone, and then watched with open mouths as two of Spider Grew's favorite men-about-town measured their length on the boardwalk. The guns that had been in Claiborne's hands were nested again in their holsters before the pop-eyed watchers hardly realized that he had used them.

Stooping between the men, he got a firm grip on the collar of each. He straightened and started dragging them down the boardwalk like two sacks of flour. Eyes were watching through the Dorado's dusty windows, and a hundred more were staring from points of vantage all along the street. This was a sight Silverdoro would not soon forget. Nugget Jim Farraday would have to avenge the insult or be laughed right out of town!

THE footloose on Bonanza Street made a parade out of it. The procession was a half block long behind Rance as he dropped his still unconscious burdens on front of the squat log and adobe jail, and tried the new keys Sheriff Kline had given him. The door grated open as he pressed against it. Musty air deluged him. Rance grinned. The cells would probably smell even worse, and if there were a few rats back in the cell-block to pester a man it wouldn't improve the tempers of the pair he'd brought here.

The rheumy oldster who'd brought his bag had been hunched outside the door. Now he was inside along with Rance, hopping around like a young pup and cackling with mirth.

"I'll open the cells for ye, sheriff," he burbled. "Know all about 'em, danged if I don't. Been crawlin' through a back winder and using one to sleep in sence the last depitty got his'n. Barroom Bill McTavish they calls me. But I ain't the sot I uster to be. No sirree, I'm starting to sober up!"

"You sober up complete," Rance said sternly. "Fix that window you've been using, and I'll let you keep your bunk." He stared thoughtfully at the pair who were beginning to stir sluggishly and groan. "Looks like I'm going to need a jailer, if business stays this good!"

"Or a coffin," said Barroom Bill.

Rance walked back to the doorway. The crowd had thickened, and he stood for a quiet moment looking out at them. There were muckers in mudcaked clothes, a few cowboys from mountain ranches, a sprinkling of dance-hall girls and frock-coated gamblers. A merchant or two in sober black had gathered courage to join the crowd. Teamsters and gun-toughs were mixed with the rest. All the types that represented this boom-camp community were here, and they were expecting something from him. They had a right to know his intentions.

"Friends," he said as the crowd fell silent waiting for him to speak, "you've seen what happened to a pair of gents who don't belong in any decent community. I'm no psalm-singin' deputy. Have your fun, all you want. But the Law is here to stay this time, and it's playing no favorites."

Rance stepped back and closed the door, and he found McTavish busily wiping off his desk, and ordering the papers on it. "I'll git a broom and pail of water, direct-

ly," he promised, "and when I git done this place'll shine like a new dollar."

"Good," Rance said. He sat down in the arm-chair behind the desk, and stretched his legs beneath it. Tiredness swept over him like a wave, and in the shimmering dust motes dancing across the window panes he fancied he saw the Silver Belle. Silver, who had primed him for trouble. It wouldn't have been so easy to smash Farraday's gun-trap without her fore-warning.

The next move now was up to Nugget Jim. It was an old, old pattern he was following, Rance reflected. Once he'd reenacted in a half dozen towns along his back trail. The Law showed it meant, business, then waited.

And this time the wait was short. McTavish was wiping cobwebs from the front windows, and Rance saw him stiffen. "See-in' some pink elephants?" he drawled.

Barroom Bill turned around. "Wuss," he said succinctly. "Spider Grew is comin' to pay you a visit, and I'd ruther see a sidewinder crawlin' through the door!"

Steps sounded outside, and Rance lazed back in his chair, but there was a Colt in his lap, hidden by the table. He was up against desperate, arrogant men here. Men who would kill him at any cost once they saw their vast empire tottering. And he had already breached their first defense. Defied the organized might of Nugget Jim Farraday, and if the gun-whipping he'd handed the man's hirelings wasn't quickly avenged others might soon defy the town-boss. Nugget Jim would know all this and so would Spider Grew. Rance wondered just what proposition the tinhorn might have to offer him.

"Come in, Grew," he called coolly. "I've been expecting you."

The gambler sidled through the door like a crab, keeping his long, weasel face toward the desk. He was a thin, narrow-shouldered man, with wide lips and eyes pale and lidless as the sidewinder McTavish had branded him.

He gave Barroom Bill a glance, then brought his eyes back to Silverdoro's new deputy. "I want to talk to you, Claiborne," he said in a high, nasal drone. "Alone."

Rance smiled. "Mac's my new jailer. We won't have anything to say that'll make him blush."

Grew shrugged. "You're callin' the cards," he answered, and his long fingers dipped inside the breast of his black box coat. He brought out a sheaf of crisp currency, and slapped it down in front of Rance. "Five thousand," he said succinctly. "Call it bail for Pod Johnson, and Lee Diamond!"

Rance looked at the money, and he let the silence drag. He could feel McTavish's eyes on him, and he knew the old timer was wondering if he'd take the money which wasn't anything more nor less than a bribe.

"Well—?" Grew demanded.

Rance reached out, and deliberately flicked the bills to the floor.

CHAPTER FOUR

"I've Got My Price!"

THE tinhorn gave an outraged howl and stepped back. "You can't do that—" he began.

Rance cut him short. "Take your payoff," he said succinctly, "and crawl back to your boss. Tell Farraday I want to see him."

"What?" the gambler shrilled. "Hell, man, you're crazy. Nugget won't come here to see you. He's boss of this town."

"Not any more," Rance told him and he was still smiling. Then his voice crackled. "Pick up your dirty dollars and get. Tell Farraday I've got my price to release your stinking gunslingers, and I'll name it to him—alone!"

Spider Grew stooped and picked up the sheaf of bills and he had regained control of himself by the time he straightened. His face was smooth, wicked in the semi-darkness of the office.

"I'll tell him," he said softly, "but you'll regret it!"

Rance watched the gambler go out the door as though a high wind had blown him, and he heard McTavish loose an explosive breath.

"Jee-hosephat," he stuttered, "I never figgered I'd live to see this happen. Young feller, your spurs are right sharp, but iff'n you use 'em too much, they'll git blunt in a hurry."

"You trot down to that restaurant I passed on my way here," Rance said, "and have yourself some supper. Take your time about it. I ain't hungry myself."

Barroom Bill McTavish nodded understandingly. "Your price ain't money," he said half to himself, "and I can whip any man who thinks different. Luck to ye, boy!"

Rance watched the oldtimer leave, and then he got up and lighted a pair of wall lamps that still had oil in them. Thoughtfully he moved to the barred front windows and pulled the shades across them. Returning to his chair, he built a cigarette, but the smoke tasted dry and hot, and he ground the butt beneath his heel. His hands, he noticed, were shaking a little. It was funny, he thought, the things that would make a man nervous. For he did have his price, one that Nugget Jim Farraday could pay.

Swift, heavy steps sounded outside the jail. The door smashed inward without any preliminary knock. Nugget Jim Farraday entered the room.

For a moment silence lay between them as they measured each other. Rance studied the saloonman, and he saw that the years hadn't changed Farraday much, but he was still old enough to be Silver's father—not her husband! His hair was white, a flowing mane roaching back to the velvet collar of his frock coat. A black string tie closed his flowing white shirt. A brocade vest covered his ample middle. Wide-shouldered, brawny, he was still in the prime of vigorous manhood at fifty-five. His white mustache was neatly trimmed, and he had a florid hue that too much good Kentucky bourbon had put there. Snapping black eyes peered from beneath beetling white brows. He did not, Rance thought swiftly, look like a crooked town-boss and yet the proof lay all about this camp.

"So Charlie Kline had to import a professional killer to rod the Law in Silverdoro, eh?" Farraday sneered.

Rance lifted his eyebrows. "Since when," he snapped suddenly, "have you started hiring cheap gunslingers? I always thought you figured your legitimate take would trim the suckers fast enough."

For a fleeting second he saw a change sweep over Farraday. The big man seemed to shrink. He opened his mouth to speak, then his jaws snapped audibly, and he was again the arrogant, imperious boss of Silverdoro.

"Claiborne," he rumbled, "I'm a busy man. If you want more than five thousand

to spring Johnson and Diamond say so."

Rance tucked his chin in a slight nod. "Whether my price is higher or lower is for you to say, mister. Fire the Silver Belle, and I'll turn your trained seals loose, immediately!"

Again the saloonman's reaction seemed a little unusual. For the space of thirty seconds, Rance was willing to swear that Nugget Jim Farraday was considering his proposition, then again he donned his mantle of arrogance like a man wrapping a cloak about his shoulders.

"Claiborne," the words rumbled from deep in his chest, "I'll see you in hell first!"

FARRADAY turned and stamped out, and Rance watched him go. He thought bitterly, "So that card turned into a deuce."

The Silver Belle remained as much of an enigma as ever, and Nugget Jim Farraday even more of one. There'd been those brief moments when the saloonman had changed, swift as quicksilver rolling across a table. He'd acted like there was some weight on his shoulders that he would gladly drop and yet something had kept him from speaking.

Rance shook his head. "Got me stumped," he muttered, "but I'm damned if its going to keep me that way."

The door opened again, and Barroom Bill McTavish strode in. The oldtimer's eyes were clear, his shoulders straight. He looked little like the old derelict who had shouldered a bag for a dollar to buy beer. This was what the feeling of a little responsibility could do for a man, Rance thought, and was pleased.

McTavish chuckled. "Son, dunno what's come over this town, but she's the quietest I've ever seen her. There ain't one of Grew's gunnies on the street, and usually they're prowlin' around lookin' for some drunk miner they can rap on the noggin and rob. Folks are drinkin' in all the dead-falls up and down the street, but they're doin' it like gents. Ye're a good influence, or somethin'."

Rance got to his feet, and picked up his hat. He tossed the keys to McTavish, and gestured at a locked gun cabinet on the wall. "Better sleep with a scattergun for a bed-mate," he advised. "Diamond and Johnson are still guests, and I'd hate to see them disturbed."

When he was gone and the door closed after him, Barroom Bill shook his head. "A cool one," he said admiringly. "Yes, sir, mighty cool!"

But outside, as he walked along the street, Rance did not feel cool. The urge to break into a run was almost overpowering. If the Silver Belle followed custom it would be about time for her first evening appearance.

The Dorado was easy to recognize at night. A barrel of burning pitch at curb-side lighted it garishly, Rance faltered for an instant as he drew near, for through the batwings and flimsy walls he could already hear the melodious notes only the Silver Belle's fingers could bring from a piano.

He paused for a moment, listening, and let nostalgic memories sweep over him unchecked. Her voice came out to him, husky, compelling, singing a song he remembered. "A Little Gray Home in the West" it was, and she had sung it that night in Cheyenne before he'd taken her walking. He'd spoken then to her of making that song come true in California.

And now, tonight, he'd ask her again, he decided with sudden recklessness. His stride quickened as he moved up the steps and pushed open the batwings. Tall in the semi-darkness of the entryway, he got his look at the big room without for the moment being noticed, and it was a scene like a dozen others he'd witnessed down the years. All the faces were turned toward a dais at the opposite end of the dance floor that occupied the center of the big, barn-like room. Turned raptly toward the slender, shapely girl seated at the upright piano there. Her hair was a golden nimbus, seeming to catch light from the silvery sheen of her long dress. Rance watched her hands move across the keys, idle seeming as falling leaves, but they brought forth music such as these men of Silverdoro had never heard before. Rance felt pride, mixed with something akin to pain, swell his chest.

Then she was finished, rising from her stool to give them all a smile and a slight bow in answer to the pandemonium of clapping and stamping that made the lamps in their high candelabra shiver and sway.

Rance looked about for Nugget Jim, but the big town-boss was not in sight. That was odd, a part of his mind was telling him as he started to step from the entryway into

the saloon. In all the times he'd attended the Silver Belle's performances he'd never seen Farraday miss a one of her shows.

Spider Grew was there, though, at the inner end of the bar, one man in all this room who wasn't applauding the girl. Rance saw her eyes searching the crowd, and Rance wondered if she was looking for him as he stepped through the fringe of men to edge of the dance-floor. She saw him, he was certain of that, and then a pair of dark-clad men stepped onto the dais, one on each side of her, and she turned with them toward a door at the rear of the platform.

Rance's foot was lifted, ready to follow them, ready to fight for his chance to see her alone, when he felt a hand grip his shoulder from behind.

"Claiborne," a voice said softly in his ear, "I've got to see you. Its urgent."

Rance paused, glanced across his shoulder. The man behind him was sober-faced, well dressed in a gray business suit. He looked like a mine owner or merchant.

"My name is Bryans," the man introduced himself. "I operate the Muleshoe. Lets get out where we can talk privately."

Rance turned against his will. The Silver Belle was like a fever burning inside him. He wanted to see her more than anything else, but his duty was to the mine owner. He owed them his service.

Outside, in the smoky light cast by the burning pitch, Bryans turned and brought a square of paper from his coat pocket. He unfolded it with fingers that shook slightly.

"Claiborne," he spoke in agitated tones, "I've got something here that I never believed I'd see. As you probably know, all the business men in this town have been paying tribute to Farraday. It was either that or quit, and all of us have been hanging on, hoping Sheriff Kline could find some man with the intelligence and bravery to come here and clean up Silverdoro. I saw you buffalo that pair of killers this afternoon, and I heard your few words at the jail. I also happen to know your past reputation and it is good. Good enough to have already given us our first break."

Rance was surprised. "What do you mean, Mr. Bryans?"

The mine operator tendered the paper. Nugget Jim Farraday had cast the words on it with bold, sure strokes.

Refunds will be available at my office in the morning for them as have paid tribute in the past."

Nugget Jim Farraday.

"What do you make of it?" Bryans asked. "I received this at the hotel by messenger and I know the boy had others to deliver. Could it just be a hoax?"

A puzzled frown knifed across Rance's brow. "Farraday," he said, "doesn't play games!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Nugget Jim Disappears

"**Y**OU'D advise us to follow instructions then, Mrs. Claiborne?"

"To the letter," Rance gave his slight nod. "I'll be on hand myself to see that he doesn't renege."

"I understand," Bryans said. He turned down Bonanza Street toward the Summit House, and Rance looked speculatively back at the Dorado, but the savor was gone from the evening now. Questions pressed in on him, and he turned slowly up-street toward the jail. What had brought about this sudden change in Farraday? Rance remembered the impression he'd got that Nugget Jim had wanted to tell him something. Had this plan been in his mind before their meeting? Rance shook his head. He didn't think so. And where had Farraday been this evening? It was another question he couldn't answer.

Silver could probably tell him, but she was well-guarded. That too was something that had never been necessary in any other Farraday saloon where she had entertained.

"Lots going on here that don't meet the eye," Rance growled, and he fumbled the jail's new keys from his pocket. Old Barroom Bill had left one turned-down lamp burning for him Rance could see through the small barred window, head-height in the door. He turned the key, pushed the panel inward, and for once all the heavy thoughts on his mind had made him relax his habitual caution.

A weight that was heavy and yielding fell against him as he stepped past the edge of the door and knocked him sidewise. Instinctively Rance flung out his arm, tried to twist, and then he was falling as a rifle

barrel cracked solidly across his skull. Falling, with the weight of a man already dead, bearing him to the floor. Barroom Bill McTavish had died trying to hold their prisoners, Rance realized dimly as he struck the floor, and they in turn had waited behind the opening door with the jailer's limp body to cast at him the moment he entered.

Lee Diamond's red face swam before his eyes. Pod Johnson leered down at him, and then another face crossed Claiborne's line of vision. It was Spider Grew, a thin, ironic smile on his lips.

"You were a fool to pass up that five thousand, mister," his words seemed to span a vast distance. "Now we're going to make a good law-dog out of you, and it won't cost us a dime!"

Rance awoke to pain such as he'd never felt before. It was like sheets of fire banding his ribs, and forking down into his legs. His head felt like one great, throbbing boil set between his shoulders.

For a moment he lay with his eyes shut, as memory of what had happened flooded back to him, and then a voice, low and husky and worried, broke through the bitter run of his thoughts.

"He's got to live," the voice was saying over and over. "Can you do nothing more for him, Joe Eagle?"

"There is magic in the herbs I have used, senorita," a soft guttural voice answered. "Time alone will answer your question."

The voice belonged to Silver and the sound of it alone was enough to make Rance forget some of the pain filling him. He pried his eyes open and tried to smile.

"I'll answer that one myself," he said. "I'm going to live a long time."

"Rance!" the Silver Belle leaned over him, and her lips were against his battered face.

"Keep that up," Rance told her, "and I'll be willing to lay here forever!"

Rance felt a dozen questions pounding through the ache in his head, but now was not the right time to ask them. There were other, more important matters that needed his attention. Silverdoro was his responsibility, every decent man and woman was looking toward him for help, and he had failed them. The thought was bitter gall in his throat.

His eyes swung and he could see that this

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words tremble on her lips, but she did not utter them, and again he had the same odd feeling that had come over him the afternoon before when he'd faced Farraday. Nugget Jim had wanted to tell him something, and now Silver was acting the same way. Almost dismally, Rance wondered if he would ever learn their secret.

He pulled on his boots and moved to unhook his black gunbelts from a wall-peg beside the door. Latching them about his waist, he swung again to face the girl, and his face was thin and austere.

"What are you going to do?" the Silver Belle's hands moved out toward Rance.

"Find Nugget Jim for you," Rance told her simply, and he knew that was something he would have to do before he could learn the answer to the mystery that had haunted him all these years.

"They'll kill you too!" the Silver Belle whispered. "The odds are all against you—"

CHAPTER SIX

Long Odds

THE odds were against him, Rance discovered, stacked higher than he'd guessed.

Lights sparkled in the Dorado when he made his entrance through the corridor that led from the Silver Belle's dressing room, and he saw poker players look up and dancers stop in midstep at sight of him. Surprise showed on their faces, and the sight puzzled Rance. These Silverdoro men looked like they hadn't been expecting to see him again. He spotted the gray clad Bryans, standing at one corner of the long bar down at the other end of the room, and started toward him. The Muleshoe boss might be able to tell him why the men here looked so surprised.

Dancers moved aside to let him pass. Gamblers were paying more attention to him than to their games. He saw a bar-keep slide from behind the mahogany, knuckle a closed door, and enter Nugget Jim Farraday's private office.

"Goin' to see Spider," Rance thought. "Begins to look like I warn't expected to show up here."

Kent Bryans' face showed as much surprise as any of the others when Rance

THE TOWN THEY COULDN'T TAME

stepped to his side. "Claiborne!" he exclaimed. "Good Lord, man, I never expected to see you."

"Why not?" Rance looked down at the smaller man.

"The word's been circulating around town ever since last night that you'd skipped out and gone back to Yuma. Nugget Jim Farraday has dropped from sight too, and Spider Grew laughed in all our faces when we owners and merchants came this morning to collect the money we'd paid for protection. He," the Muleshoe man hesitated, "hinted that you and Farraday had struck a bargain and left town together."

Rance's hooded eyes bored into Bryans. "And you believed that?" he asked.

"Claiborne," the Muleshoe man moved his hands, "I'll be perfectly frank with you. We didn't know what to believe. The Law has been treed so many times around here that we've about lost confidence. You were our last hope, and when the word got about that that you'd skipped—"

"I'll give this town plenty to think about before I'm done with it," Rance told the mine owner. "But right now my job is to locate Nugget Jim Farraday. He didn't leave town, I'm sure of that, and there ain't many places 'round and about where Grew and his gunnies could have hidden him."

Bryans' brow showed a puzzle frown. "I don't understand," he said. "Farraday is the leader of this outlaw faction."

"Nugget Jim," Rance said quietly, "is no more boss of this town than you are." And he was thinking of the Silver Belle as he spoke. He was going to clear Nugget Jim's name for her and her alone. "Spider Grew," he went on, "is the king-pin, and he's got some hold on Farraday that's made him knuckle under and carry out orders. Rid this town of him," his voice grew hard as iron, "and there'll be no more trouble in Silverdoro."

As though his mention of the man's name was a signal, Spider Grew came from Farraday's office. Sidling along like a crab, his narrow shoulders hunched, he moved to the inner end of the bar, beady eyes traveling toward the town-tamer, and then Rance saw the tinhorn's gaze shift to one of the white-aproned barkeepers who was stooping to a ring-bolt set in the floor midway along the runway behind the bar.

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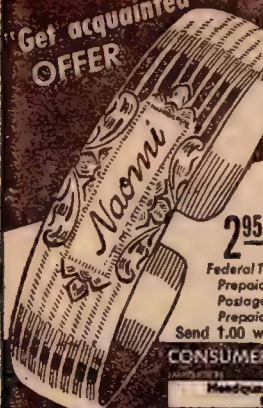
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"Grant," Spider Grew's voice carried sharply through the murmuring voices of patrons along the bar, "hold up there. If you're running short I'll bring you more liquor from the basement."

Rance watched the barkeep straighten and his interest sharpened at the puzzled expression on the apron's round face. "But I allus bring up the stuff—" he started to say, then Grew's voice cut him short, and there was a note close to a snarl in it. "I said I'd do it, Grant!"

He was stepping in behind the bar as he spoke, moving rapidly toward the trapdoor in the floor that led down to the Dorado's cellar.

"That's odd," Rance heard Bryans say, "I've never seen Grew do that before."

"Mebbe," Rance told him softly, "there's something down below that he ain't hankerin' to have his barkeeps find. And mebbe," he added, "we'll learn what it is—"

He watched Spider Grew tug open the heavy door, and the man's eyes flashed a silent command to lounging gunnies stationed inconspicuously enough about the saloon.

Rance saw the men start to move toward the bar, and words could have told him no more plainly that Nugget Jim Farraday was a prisoner in the Dorado's cellar!

A TALL, slender figure cased in shimmering silver cloth came into view through the corridor he had travelled such a short time before himself, and Rance saw her appearance electrify the room. Instant applause spattered like hail on a tin roof, and Rance thought that the Silver Belle's entrance could have been no more timely. He saw her appearance throw Grew's gunnies off balance. The men faltered, turning like everyone else in the big saloon to watch Silver step toward the piano on a dais along the side wall.

The girl's eyes found the town-tamer and her lips smiled for him alone. "Lord," he thought, "and Nugget Jim is the man she loves!"

Like black shadows, Rance saw Joe Eagle and his Apache companion slide from the shadowy corridor behind the girl, and he sent his own silent command to them as Joe Eagle's eyes found him tall beside the bar. He saw the Apache nod, and knew

THE TOWN THEY COULDN'T TAME

they would guard his back as best they could.

"Adios, Bryans," he said softly. "Tell Silver goodbye for me, if I don't come back."

"You—" Bryans started to say in a surprised voice, but Rance was paying the mine owner no more attention. With long strides that appeared deceptively idle, he moved around the end of the bar.

"Hey," a startled aprons cried, "you ain't allowed back here, mister!" The man reached for a bung-starter racked beneath the mahogany.

"Think again, friend," Rance said, and the wicked excitement that always filled him when the chips were down was in him now as the Silver Belle's voice warmed the room.

One long Colt came easily from leather, and its arc was short and brutally effective as he laid the barrel alongside the barkeep's head. The man sagged, and Rance heard a thin yell from one of Grew's gunnies who had seen the swift action.

The man's arm dropped toward his holster, and then as he bent swiftly toward the ring-bolt in the floor, Rance caught the fleeting glimpse of Joe Eagle's hand streaking back to the neck of his coat. Bowie steel glowed in the lamp light streaking across space, and Rance saw the Grew gunnie gasp and sag forward.

Another barkeep was rushing toward him brandishing a short club. Regretting it, Rance swung his Colt and triggered. The apron sprawled forward, one leg smashed from under him. But it was the racket of the shot that would do the damage. Now every eye was turning from the Silver Belle, realizing that something was wrong at the bar, but the girl never faltered. Rance heard her tones carrying on, clear and sweet above the sudden uproar of voices asking questions of one another.

Stairs dropped steeply, and at the bottom of them Rance saw the faint glow of light on a stone floor. A gun smashed lead up at him before he was halfway down. He targeted the mushrooming flame, and returned the fire. A man cursed throatily and he heard the sound of breaking glass as someone in the dimness below him staggered into cased liquor.

He was down then, crouched on the balls of his feet, a Colt balanced in each hand,



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and there was no mercy in his heart for any Grew hiring he might face down here. No mercy, for this time he was fighting for more than his own life—he was battling to save Nugget Jim Farraday for the girl who loved him.

Muzzle flame blasted from the end of a runway between stacked cases of liquor, and Rance felt the hot bite of lead through his right arm. The Colt in that hand would not rise. He dodged to the cover of the cases, and with a last effort sent the Colt skidding down the runway.

Spider Grew's thin laugh came back to him. "Winged, eh, Claiborne? Give me another sight of yuh, and I'll do the same to your other arm. Always figgered you badge-totin' two gun men were never much good with your left hands—"

"You got me there, Grew," Rance said loudly, and then with the words still hanging in air he wormed his way between other cases, dim in the light of the single hanging lantern suspended from a center beam.

"Come on out, Claiborne," Grew called tauntingly, and Rance knew the tinhorn was trying to draw some reply that would place him. The gambler's voice was only a little way ahead now. Rance moved swiftly, and he put his shoulder to a towering stack of cases and pushed. The boxes teetered, bent slowly, and Rance heard the frenzied scrape of Spider Grew's boots as he tried to leap clear of the tottering pile. Then the cases dropped with a clash of rending wood and breaking glass. Grew's voice rose in a howling scream.

Cautiously, Rance circled the pile of cases, conscious of the acrid fumes of whisky rising to his nostrils. The crumpled heap of Spider Grew lay beneath the cases, and one glance at the man's pale, narrow face was enough to tell him that the gambler was dead. The edge of one heavy case had caught him at the base of the skull, snapped vertebrae and spinal cord.

Muffled sounds were coming from a small, inner storehouse, and Rance leaped toward it, thumbing a match alight as he reached the door. Its flame showed him a rumpled bunk and the big shape of Nugget Jim Farraday stretched on it. The man's hands and legs were bound, and a rag had been stuffed between his teeth, but his eyes were still bright and savagely intolerant.

THE TOWN THEY COULDN'T TAME

Rance grinned with relief and awkwardly pulled the gag from Farraday's mouth. "We'll get you up in short order, Jim," he promised, "but fust I better take a look-see outside and see who's coming down to visit us—"

He stepped into the open cellar, and a shimmering shape almost collided with him, then brushed on past. Joe Eagle was at the bottom of the cellar stairs, and his arms were spread against others trying to crowd down into the cellar.

"You will all know what is happening here soon," he was promising them. "But thees much I think I can say. The senor, Spider Grew, will be dead."

Behind him, Rance heard the Silver Belle gasp, and he held himself from turning too soon. He did not want the added torment of seeing the reunion of Silver with the man she loved. Then he felt her hand on his arm.

"Rance," her voice was softer and lovelier than he'd ever heard it before. "Rance, look at me. I've got something to tell you. Something I guess you had a right to know a long time ago, but we, we had to be sure. You see dad made me promise him that I'd wait for the right man—"

"You dad?" Rance spun to face the smiling girl, and he knew that he must look foolish for he could feel his mouth hanging open. "Nugget Jim is—"

"My father," Silver said simply.

"Yes, you danged idjit," Farraday had got his voice under control. "And I been a selfish one at that, but mebbe we'll make it up from now on. Grew guessed our secret and threatened to spread the news all over Arizony that I was lettin' my own daughter sing in a honkytonk. Woulda ruined both of us if he'd done it, so I had to knuckle under. Thing is, Rita's been gettin' her practice this way, learnin' poise and such like truck, so she can get the kind of career she deserves."

"Which," Rita Farraday said primly, "will consist of being a good wife from now on, if—if you still want me, Rance—"

Rance Claiborne drew musty, whiskey-laden air into his lungs, and it tasted like sweet prairie wind. "There won't ever be another—" he promised softly. "Never another, for me—"

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(Continued from page 49)

livered him into the hands of the sleepy marshal. Then, grumbling, they went off to seek another saloon.

Gomez' conscience bothered him. He had, after all, abandoned his friend and companion under fire. That was certainly not correct behavior. Again, perhaps Gomez recalled, although the Kid's captors were ignorant of his already amazing record, that slender, pink-cheeked William Bonney had already killed at least one man.

Late that night, Gomez stole, under a dimmed moon, to the jailhouse window. Anxiously, the Mexican peered through the barred opening. The Kid was sitting glumly on a stool over in a far corner.

"Hey!" whispered Gomez. The Kid didn't stir. The Mexican worried. He took hold of the bars and spoke softly.

"Don you worry, amigo. I'll get you out. I never desert a companero."

There was a small noise, like a tiny slap. Gomez drew back sharply from the window and frowned, raising a hand to his cheek. Hardly moving, the Kid had spat right in his face. Gomez could imagine the cold, soulless fury in those shallow blue eyes and he felt the hair rise along the back of his neck. Slowly, he backed off into the shadows, thinking very hard.

William Bonney's jailer was uneasy too. His prisoner had risen to his feet at dawn and begun to fling himself restlessly from one side of his cell to the other in great, long strides.

The marshal stepped to the cell door and surveyed the prisoner. The prisoner looked back with a cold, steady gaze and the marshal experienced a strange sensation.

It was no wonder, then, that the marshal and the jailer nearly choked with amazement when, along about noon, a very old, bent woman, her face shadowed by a huge sunbonnet, edged into the marshal's office and whispered hoarsely,

"I'd like to see the prisoner."

"W—who are you?" stammered the marshal. The old lady lowered her eyes.

"I be the mother of the—of the criminal. Please can I see my boy?"

The marshal scratched his head and the jailer merely gaped. Then the lawman, who also had a mother, said helplessly,

"Wal, I reckon you can." He rose to

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conduct the tottering matron to the adobe cell. The mother swept aside her trailing skirt and sat down heavily upon a nearby stool. Her hand, encased in a lace mitt, folded itself upon her ample bosom and she panted, seeming pressed for breath. In another hoarse whisper, she said,

"I can't—I can't see my boy in jail. Don't make a mother speak to her son through iron bars."

The marshal signaled to the jailer, who tromped down to the cell and brought back William Bonney.

The mother leaped to her feet, swept across the floor in one great stride, and sobbed, "My son—my leetle boy."

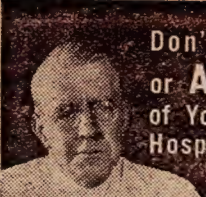
As she raised her arms to fling them around the prisoner's neck, there was a jangle of metal underneath her wide skirt, and a sixgun crashed to the stone floor.

Quick as a snake, Bonney swooped to the floor, snatched it up and leveled it at his captors.

"One chance in a million," he muttered, backing rapidly toward the door, "one in a million."

Mother Bonney dropped her skirts to reveal a long area of masculine leg encased in Levis and boots. From the depths of the sunbonnet rumbled the musical Spanish accent of Pancho Gomez.

"Wait for me, Keed," he called. For answer, Billy the Kid, free again, slammed and bolted the jailhouse door on the marshal, the jailer, and his erstwhile companion. Then, as the marshal and the jailer beat alternately on the locked door and on Gomez, the Kid strode rapidly down the street to the end of the block, where a horse was tied. A few minutes later he rode out of Albuquerque and into History.



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If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking excess acids and poisonous waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of

pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

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The Secret of MENTAL CREATING

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All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

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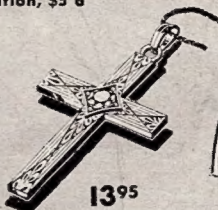
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